

August
2024

ANIMATIONTM MAGAZINE

Despicable Me 4
Saving Bikini Bottom
SpongeBob at 25
Disney's Primos
Hulu's Animayhem

The Dark Knight Has Arrived!
Bruce Timm Unveils the New
Batman: Caped Crusader

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**Futurama
Season 12
Busts Out on
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THE BUSINESS, TECHNOLOGY & ART OF ANIMATION AND VFX

Comic-Con Edition

August
2024

ANIMATIONTM MAGAZINE



REVENGE WAS
ONLY THE BEGINNING

MARVEL

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hulu

THE HIT SERIES RETURNS!

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**Solar Opposites
Returns to Its
Alien Roots
on Hulu
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**SOLAR
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TRANSFORMERS ONE



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SPANISH PROJECTS SELECTED AT CARTOON FORUM 2024



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August

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A SUPER VILLAIN'S FOURTH OUTING

Director Chris Renaud takes us behind the scenes of Illumination's eagerly anticipated summer movie *Despicable Me 4*.

THE TEXAN SQUIRREL TAKES CENTER STAGE!

The team behind *Saving Bikini Bottom: The Sandy Cheeks Movie* tells us everything we need to know about the fun summer pic.

MILESTONES

NAUTICAL NONSENSE WITH HEART!

SpongeBob SquarePants celebrates 25 years of hilarious, absorbent fun.

ABSORBENT MEMORIES

Super-versatile *SpongeBob* actor Tom Kenny looks back at his alter ego's legacy.

TV | STREAMING

HOLY NOIRISH COMEBACK, BATMAN!

Bruce Timm and James Tucker give us a preview of their much-anticipated new series, *Batman: Caped Crusader*.

LIFE WITH THE FAMILIA

Primos series creator Natasha Kline discusses the goals and inspirations of her heartwarming new Disney show.

RETURN TO PLANET EXPRESS

Futurama's longtime showrunner & head writer David X. Cohen gives us the scoop on the popular show's 12th glorious season.

SWINGING BACK INTO ACTION

Will Speck and Josh Gordon take us behind the scenes of Season 2 of their hit animated series, *Hit-Monkey*.

LOVING THE ALIENS

Exec producers Josh Bycel and Mike McMahan spill the beans on the exciting fifth season of Hulu's *Solar Opposites*.

ANOTHER TASTY TREAT

Showrunners Ariel Shaffir and Kyle Hunter give us a taste of their new Prime Video spinoff series, *Sausage Party: Foodtopia*.

HOW TO UNLEASH A MONSTER-SIZED HIT

A look at how the team behind Production I.G.'s *Kaiju No. 8* captured the magic of the successful manga.

EVENTS

COLORADO'S COMPUTER GRAPHIC HIGH

Expects lots of thought-provoking animated shorts, visual experiments and revealing panels at this month's SIGGRAPH confab in Denver.

POETRY IN MOTION

Director Moshe Mahler discusses the inspiration and process of making his award-winning short, *The Art of Weightlessness*.

STAYING ON TRACK

Director Alex Glawion takes us on the creative journey of making his award-winning short, *Patterns*.

VFX|TECH

A THIRD ENCOUNTER WITH THE BLIND ALIENS

VFX supervisor Malcolm Humphreys offers his take on creating the captivating visuals for *A Quiet Place: Day One*.

TECH REVIEWS: SPECIAL SIGGRAPH EDITION

Chaos Vantage, V-Slate, InstaMAT and Creation Effects' Black Hole, Terra & Solaris.

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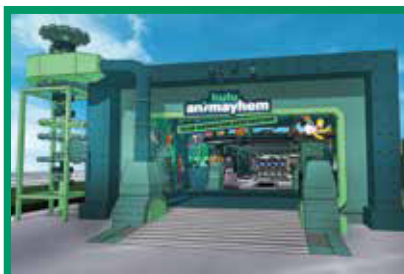


MILESTONES

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Hulu is bringing **Animayhem** back to San Diego Comic-Con with a zany, 2D-ifying factory where its beloved animated series are made. Check out the "factory," home of animated titles such as *Bob's Burgers*, *Family Guy*, *Futurama*, *The Simpsons* and more! The activation is located right next to the Convention Center in the Bayfront's Parking Lot!

COVER: Warner Bros. Animation's *Batman: Caped Crusader* premieres on Prime Video on August 1.

Comic-Con Covers: We have three different exclusive Comic-Con covers featuring *Futurama*, *Solar Opposites* and *Hit-Monkey* — all part of Hulu's summer lineup. (*Futurama* cover image by Matt Groening [2024] © 20th Television Animation & *Futurama*)

Siggraph Cover: Paramount's *Transformers One* opens nationwide on Sept. 20. (We'll have a feature story about the movie in next month's issue — September/2024, issue no. 343.)



"You can never escape me. Bullets don't harm me. Nothing harms me. But I know pain."

— Frank Miller, *Batman*, Vol. 1, #407



Has there ever been a more brooding, angst-ridden superhero than DC's Batman? Created by artist Bob Kane and writer Bill Finger over 85 years ago, the tormented Dark Knight has been the subject of numerous comic books, TV shows, movies, games and animated projects. We are quite fortunate to witness the birth of another new incarnation this summer with *Batman: Caped Crusader*, the highly-anticipated series produced by J.J. Abrams, Matt Reeves and animation icon Bruce Timm. Our writer Jeff Spry was fortunate enough to chat with Timm about the new

possibilities, designs and storylines featured on the Prime Video series, and I hope you enjoy reading all the glorious details in our annual Comic-Con/SIGGRAPH issue.

Speaking of animation legends, this summer is a big season for the Bikini Bottom gang. Not only is Netflix premiering the colorful new *Saving Bikini Bottom: The Sandy Cheeks Movie* on August 2, Nickelodeon is also planning an extravagant cavalcade of activities and programs in celebration of *SpongeBob SquarePants*' 25th anniversary. We had a chance to speak with the show's wonderful exec producers and showrunners Marc Ceccarelli and Vince Waller and the brilliant voice of the Sponge himself, Tom Kenny. As always, they provided insightful and hilarious thoughts about the late Stephen Hillenburg's legacy and the show's lasting influence on pop culture.

We also had the chance to catch up with three of our favorite adult animated shows — *Futurama*, *Solar Opposites* and *Hit-Monkey* — that are lighting up Hulu's lineup this summer. All three series are back for new episodes, and we were able to speak with all of the talented show-runners about what we can all expect from these sophisticated, clever and definitely off-the-wall toons.

Longtime *Animation Magazine* contributor Ellen Wolff also provides us with a sneak peek at what we can expect to see and experience at the 2024 edition of SIGGRAPH in Denver this month. Just a quick look at the Electronic Theater's lineup and the list of the event's keynotes and panels reveals that the computer graphics confab continues to push the envelope and brings its attendees up to date with the latest developments, technologies and scientific innovations.

We hope you enjoy our mid-summer issue. I'll leave you with three of my favorite *SpongeBob* quotes that seem perfect for this hellishly hot season on Planet Earth:

INBETWEENS by: Bob Harper



"I remember when Comic-Con actually sold comics."



Batman has graced our cover four times in the past 37 years.

"I know of a place where you never get harmed: A magical place with magical charms. Indoors! Indoors! Indoors!"
"Oh well, I guess I'm not wearing any pants today."
"Can I be excused for the rest of my life?"

Ramin

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Animation Planner

August

1 Prime Video returns to Bruce Timm's Gotham in the adult animated series **Batman: Caped Crusader**. **SIGGRAPH** comes to a close after five days of celebrating the cutting edge of computer graphics and immersive tech in Denver. [s2024.siggraph.org]



2 Catch the next wave of hilarious adventure with **Saving Bikini Bottom: The Sandy Cheeks Movie**, now on Netflix. In theaters, Zachary Levi plays a grown up kids' book hero in the live-action/animated **Harold and the Purple Crayon**, directed by Ice Age vet Carlos Saldanha.



3 Studio Ghibli Fest brings Hayao Miyazaki's **Ponyo** back to theaters through Fathom Events for five days only, followed by **Whisper of the Heart** (Aug. 25 & 27) and **The Cat Returns** (Aug. 26 & 28).



9 A colorful mixed-media pre-k fave is refreshed in **Yo Gabba GabbaLand** on AppleTV+. Meanwhile, older kids can get into the martial arts action of **Tales of the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles** on Paramount+.



12 Can Earth withstand the unhinged alien meddlings of **Solar Opposites Season 5**? Tune in to Hulu to find out!

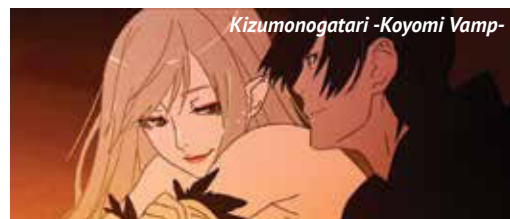
15 Henry Selick's stop-motion classic **Coraline** returns to theaters in a new 3D remaster from LAIKA.



16 Young YouTube fans and their fams can catch the hybrid film **Ryan's World the Movie: Titan Universe Adventure** in theaters today.



28 Crunchyroll and SPE haunt theaters with the three-film anime adaptation **Kizumonogatari -Koyomi Vamp-**, about a high schooler who befriends a tragically beautiful vampire.



29 Another pop culture icon gets animated in the new Netflix adult series **Terminator Zero**.

August Animation Festivals

Countryside Animafest Cyprus | Salamiou, Cyprus | animafest.com.cy
Imaginaria | Conversano, Italy | imaginaria.eu
PFCAT | Portland, Oregon | pdxfestofcinema.com
Turku Animated Film Festival | Turku, Finland | taff.fi

To get your company's events and products listed in this monthly calendar, please e-mail edit@animationmagazine.net.



ALL THE BIG ANIMATION EVENTS OF THE MONTH AT YOUR FINGERTIPS!

Keeping track of all the many animation and vfx shows and events each year is a lot easier with ***Animation Magazine's*** annual trade-show calendar.

Download our 2024 calendar, filled with great images and helpful info about all your favorite toon events and trade shows of the year.

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The Must-Have List

The Art of El Tigre: The Adventures of Manny Rivera

Revisit the hit Nickelodeon series with this bilingual book (English and Spanish), featuring sketches, early character designs and interviews with creators Jorge R. Gutierrez and Sandra Equihua as well as key animators and artists. Written by Chris McDonnell (*Adventure Time: The Art of Ooo*, *The Art of Invader Zim*). [Abrams | \$40]



The Art of The Imaginary

For fans who can't wait for a local printing, the Japanese-language exploration of Studio Ponoc's fantastical new Netflix feature is available from specialty retailers. The book is loaded with production art, including image boards, character design sketches and background paintings. Gallery Nucleus also has a limited number of copies signed by director Yoshiyuki Momose and producer Yoshiaki Nishimura (\$85). [Kadokawa | \$46 | japanese-creative-books.com]



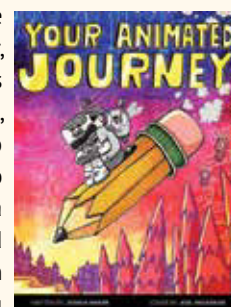
Drawing for Nothing

Celebrate the unseen creativity of canceled animated features with this free digital compendium chronicling the fates of axed titles like *Me and My Shadow*, *B.O.O.*, *Dreaming Machine*, *Larrikins*, *Dragon's Lair* and more. [drawinformnothing.com]



Your Animated Journey

Billed as a self-help guide to anyone interested in an animation career, author Joshua Pinker leverages his experience as an animation student, intern, staffer and freelancer to present a comprehensive how-to to help you survive and thrive in a challenging industry. The physical and bonus editions include a Q&A section with even more advice from working animators. [youranimatedjourney.com | \$35 | \$20 ebook]



The Last Unicorn (4K Remaster)

Rankin/Bass's enchanting 1982 fantasy receives a high-def update in this new set, remastering the 2D animation with a 4K transfer of the 35mm interpositive. Featuring the voices of Mia Farrow, Jeff Bridges, Christopher Lee and more, the magical adventure comes bundled with making-of featurette, animated storyboards, a Q&A and brand-new profile of author/screenwriter Peter S. Beagle. Fans who order through Shout! Factory will get an exclusive poster while supplies last. [Shout! Factory | \$35 | Aug. 20]



Dragonkeeper

The pioneering Spanish-Chinese co-pro makes its stateside DVD debut this month. Based on the fantasy novel by Carole Wilkinson, the CG feature follows a girl named Ping who goes on a quest to save an imperiled dragon and all its kind. Featuring the voices of Bill Nighy and newcomer Mayalinee Griffiths, the movie is directed by Salvador Simó. [Shout! | \$20 | Aug. 27]



Neopets Tabletop RPG

With the popular digital pet platform celebrating its 25th anniversary this year, the crew at Geekify launched a Kickstarter for this officially endorsed project on July 12. Built on an easy to learn d20 system, the game lets you create a custom Neopets character (50 species to choose from), form a party, explore the far corners of Neopia and revel in nostalgia as you go on quests, solve puzzles and forge your destiny. [kickstarter.com]



— Mercedes Milligan

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A Super Villain's Fourth Outing

Director Chris Renaud takes us behind the scenes of Illumination's eagerly anticipated summer movie *Despicable Me 4*.

By Karen Idelson



Former supervillain Gru is back at his mission as a reformed baddie in one of this summer's biggest releases — *Despicable Me 4*. This time, Gru (voiced by Steve Carell) must fight evil while trying to manage being the father of a newborn, Gru Jr.

Fans will be happy to see familiar creatives in the credits. The film is directed by Chris Renaud and co-directed by Patrick Delage, who makes his feature film debut on this movie. Chris Meledandri and Brett Hoffman are producers on the project. Mike White and Ken Daurio wrote the film.

The fourth feature's plotline revolves around villain Maxime Le Mal (Will Ferrell), who escapes from jail with his girlfriend and

seeks revenge on Gru and his family. Gru must then rise to the occasion while still attending to his responsibilities as a father.

"I think that we always try to think of ideas that are universal and relatable," says Renaud in a recent interview with *Animation Magazine*. "We started this story by talking about the family moving and leaving their familiar home. And that's obviously something that a lot of us have



gone through. I went through it when I was 15. It was very kind of a life-altering experience, as I'm sure it is for a lot of people. So that seemed like a great place to start."

Renaud, who also directed Illumination's



'I'm a parent with two kids, and a lot of the filmmakers are parents too, so it's always good to have that ability to create these universal concepts that everybody can really relate to.'

— Director & exec producer Chris Renaud



MINION POWER: After having a terrific opening weekend (over \$149.3 million worldwide), *Despicable Me 4* is on its way to being one of the biggest movies of the year at the box office.

two previous *Despicable Me* movies, as well as two *The Secret Life of Pets* features, says one of the rewarding aspects of this franchise is that you can tell a lot of different stories based on a character or group. "You can look at a family problem or dynamic and who's the new villain that group is going [to] go up against," he explains. "There are also certain elements in this movie like the talent show, which a little bit comes from my own experience playing with friends, so you always bring your own thoughts and ideas and experiences in life. I'm a parent with two kids, and a lot of the filmmakers are parents too, so it's always good to have that ability to create these universal concepts that everybody can really relate to. We're also interested in finding the comedic way to tell the story and to make those story ideas funny."

As Renaud and his team approached *DM4*, they understood that advances in animation tools would make this installment a little less difficult to make.

"As a director, honestly, it's gotten so much easier," says Renaud. "It's so much easier than the process when we made the first *Despicable Me*. On our first film, we were

trying to figure out the new pipeline and new tools. A lot of what we were doing was just policing for mistakes. It could be a bit of a fraught process. Now, most of our discussions really are about creative choices. There was one shot I can think of in this that we just decided we didn't need. It was good and we [were] going to achieve it, but we thought maybe we shouldn't. That's a creative conversation."

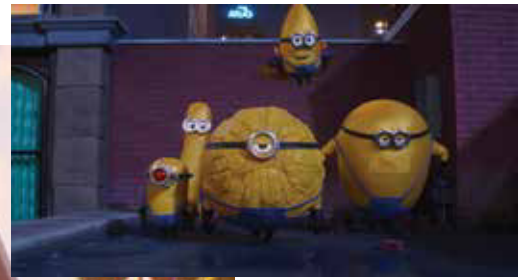
Growing Pains

The director says he and his team always ask themselves whether something is really worth doing. "You're very free to try so many things," he adds. "I found it to be easier and easier as the tools have advanced. The design language has evolved a little bit, particularly in this movie because this movie is a very grounded idea. It's in the suburbs, and it's not as kooky as stealing the Moon or *trying* to steal the Moon. So, there's balance to that a little bit. *Despicable Me*, which is very graphic and has a European-influenced design style with this kind of very normal world they're going into, which was the point of their sort of leaving their neighborhood. So, you have to

kind of [have] the design language between the two; you have to kind of figure out how to bridge that."

In addition to Illumination's signature design, the character of Gru is heavily defined by Carell, whose audacious performance brought the character's idiosyncrasies out in full view for the audience. For Renaud, there's just no one better to work with on this kind of project.

"I think [Steve's] performance defined what we look for in other actors to support that character," says Renaud. "We want to be cooking up kind of a bigger-than-life version of these characters. Steve is obviously doing an accent, and it's got real scale to it. And that's really what we look for in people that are going to be part of this universe as well. For me, personally, I love working with comedians and I love working with people who can take their characters over the top and find the humor in everything that happens. That's why a lot of people we work with are comedians and *Saturday Night Live* alums. It's because that show is essentially character creation. Our characters really require a lot of broadness, and because the actors are often



TWO VILLAINS AND A BABY: Directed by Chris Renaud, the latest addition in the ever-expanding *Despicable Me* franchise includes a new baby (Gru Jr.) and the villain Maxime Le Mal (voiced by Will Ferrell) and his girlfriend, Valentina (Sofia Vergara).



comedians or from *SNL*, they are perfect to fill out these animated characters.”

Of course, there were some challenges. “They only have their voice, and there’s no physical way for them to fill out the characters, and there’s no camera to pick up their facial expressions, their body language,” explains the director. “The performances need a kind of scale when they go to the audio recording. With Steve, we sort of landed on this idea with Gru as being this dad who is struggling with his choices with wanting to be a parent and wanting to be working too. It’s also the accent that you hear, and again, the broadness of it, that defines a lot of the storytelling.”

Carell, who reprises his signature role as Gru, is joined by Will Ferrell as Maxime Le Mal,

Miranda Cosgrove playing Margo, Joey King as Poppy, Kristen Wiig as Lucy Wilde, Stephen Colbert as Perry Prescott, Will Arnett playing Mr. Perkins and Sofia Vergara as Valentina.

Those Brilliant Voices

Renaud says he was thrilled to have so many highly skilled actors in his voice cast. For him, it makes things more defined and appealing for the audience when the characters are portrayed with real imagination.

“Steve [Carell] is very thoughtful in his approach to Gru, as silly as the movies are,” says Renaud. “He really has a point of view on it. He comes in with a point of view, and we talk, and he’s always suggesting things that give more to his character. He really thinks about what it should be. How you play that

is a tricky moment, because [Gru’s] trying to reassure his son while he’s also living a kind of secret, undercover life. Again, it’s a testament to Steve’s performance. I think it works as well as it does [also] with Will Ferrell because the character was named Maxime Le Mal and Will is so committed. All you can do is jump in. Though we record the voices separately, you feel like Will and Steve are right there in each other’s worlds. And you feel that with all the actors in the film. It’s the kind of thing that we can’t go without and always want to have. You always want actors who can become perfect fit with the two or more other people.” ♦♦

Universal released Illumination’s *Despicable Me 4* in theaters on July 3.



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The Texan Squirrel Takes Center Stage!

The team behind *Saving Bikini Bottom: The Sandy Cheeks Movie* tells us everything we need to know about the fun summer pic.

By Tom McLean



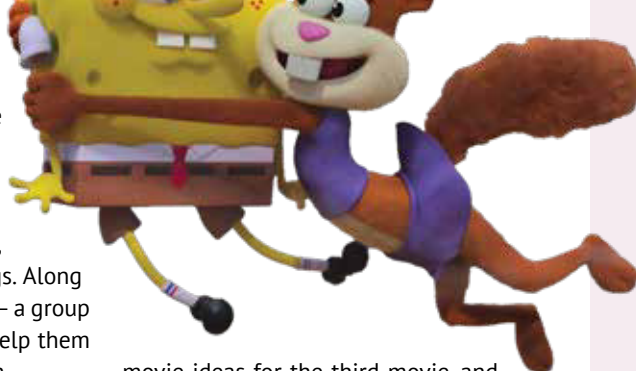
For more than 25 years, SpongeBob SquarePants and his pals in Bikini Bottom have made animation fans of all ages laugh. But it turns out that even everyone's favorite porous pal needs some help to save that ocean-floor oasis, giving his scientific squirrel pal a shot at the stardom she deserves in the feature *Saving Bikini Bottom: The Sandy Cheeks Movie*, premiering August 2 on Netflix.

"I would hear whispers at work that there was something happening, and it might be Sandy," says Carolyn Lawrence, who's voiced Sandy since the start of the *SpongeBob* animation empire. "So, when I got the call that it actually was happening, I couldn't believe it. It felt like it came out of nowhere, even though it had been years in the making."

The feature-length adventure sees Bikini Bottom scooped up by a research lab headed by Sue Nahmee — say it out loud — played in live action by Wanda Sykes. This forces Sandy to tap into her scientific know-how to find her missing home and, along with SpongeBob and pals, try to get it back to where it belongs. Along the way, they run into Sandy's family — a group of traveling circus performers — to help them track down and restore Bikini Bottom.

Sandy in the Spotlight

Executive producer Marc Ceccarelli says *Saving Bikini Bottom* had a long gestation period. "I first pitched this ... back when we were all doing a round table of pitching



movie ideas for the third movie, and we ended up not using this one at that time," he says. "But then, a few years later, they decided they wanted to do something specifically with Sandy-centric stories, so we kind of had that story in our back pocket, and we pulled it out again and developed it

Photo: Nickelodeon/YouTube



'Part of the struggle early on was I am so high energy when I play her that they always asked me to slow down. I remember Steve Hillenburg used to hold up a sign to me at the recording studio that said, "Slow Down!" It was like, "I can't slow down; I'm a squirrel!"'

- Actor Carolyn Lawrence



RELIABLE HEROES: Sandy Cheeks and SpongeBob come to the rescue when Bikini Bottom and all its denizens are suddenly scooped out of the ocean.



further, and it became this."

Although the *SpongeBob* franchise has often mixed animation and live action, *Saving Bikini Bottom* developed its own blend of CG animation and live action that gives familiar characters a new look.

The feature is directed by Liza Johnson, a newcomer to animation whose credits include episodes of *The Last of Us*, *A Series of Unfortunate Events* and *Dead to Me*. "It's much more of a break with the animated world, and the script that I was sent was much more integrated, where in the beginning and end of the movie, it's very fully animated, but in the middle, in the big middle, it's very integrated, like between the kind of photographic world and the animated world," she says.

Ceccarelli says they chose Johnson based on her work directing a Season 2 episode of the

FX comedy series, *What We Do in the Shadows*, titled "The Curse." The episode had Ceccarelli's favorite joke in the series, where the vampires abandon the series' mockumentary film crew in a house full of rival vampires. "When they told me that she had directed that, I was like, 'Oh, great!'" he says.

"I was a little surprised as well to, you know, be invited to do something that has so much animation in it, just because I've never done it before, but I was really excited to do it with [animation supervisor] Piero Piluso," Johnson says. "Together, we were really able, I think, to do something that's quite hybrid."

Johnson started work early on to storyboard the entire movie and create an integrated look for the mix of live action and animation.

"What we tried to do is make the kind of most elevated design of each character, most

elevated surfacing of each character and, I think most important to the franchise, the most specific and detailed acting for each character," Johnson says. "We really tried to make sure that as we got through all the stages that we retained the specificity and the detail of those motions."

All this was a quick education in animated filmmaking for Johnson. "We each had to learn a lot of new vocabulary," she says. "There are words that are really common for animators that were new to me, and also words that are really common for live action that I was the only one to say them."

The pushed animation style of the *SpongeBob* universe, combined with the story's requirements and technical and budget limitations, all were factors in deciding how certain sequences would look to ensure "that



THE WET, WILD WEST: Carolyn Lawrence takes center stage as the voice of Sandy Cheeks. Tom Kenny, Clancy Brown, Bill Fagerbakke, Rodger Bumpass, Mr. Lawrence and Johnny Knoxville lend their voices to the fun new movie.



everything that people love and care about each character is still present, even though we're doing it in new conditions," she says.

Johnson says the movie's strength is Sandy's character arc. "I think a lot of people can relate to the challenge to grow up on your own and to become the person that you want to be, which, as often as not, is perhaps not exactly the life that your family, your biological family, designed for you," she says. "And I think that it presents a depth of understanding of who Sandy is. I think in most episodes of the show, we understand that she's a competent scientist that's found herself in this amazing underwater environment, and she's going around doing competent things down there, but I don't think that we've ever really had the chance to think about how she got there, or whether that was hard, or what she might have done to overcome those obstacles."

Executive producer Vincent Waller says that the franchise's ability to support movies and series with supporting characters is a testament to the strength of the show, created by the late Stephen Hillenburg, and the care taken in developing its world and characters.

"When we first started, it was really all about SpongeBob, and if SpongeBob wasn't on screen for about three seconds, people started getting antsy and going, 'Where's SpongeBob?'" says Waller. "But after all these years of soaking into the — I was gonna say

the pores of America, but it's really the pores of the world — suddenly, it's like you can chase Squidward, you can chase Sandy, and people are interested in her and they want to know her backstory."

Besides Lawrence, the movie stars *SpongeBob* regulars Tom Kenny as SpongeBob SquarePants, Bill Fagerbakke as Patrick Star, Mr. Lawrence as Plankton, Clancy Brown as Mr. Krabs and Rodger Bumpass as Squidward. New roles include Sandy's family members, voiced by Johnny Knoxville, Craig Robinson, Grey Griffin and Ilia Isorely's Paulino; and live-action turns by Matty Cardarople and Sykes. The movie's story is by Kaz, and the teleplay is by Kaz and Tom Stern.

Having embodied Sandy for 25 years, Lawrence says she loved the script immediately. "I liked Liza's vision for it and I thought the team did a great job writing it, and it was fun for me after 25 years to learn things about [Sandy], like, Oh, I'd never met her family. I didn't know who her family was. I didn't know she was from Galveston. Like, it's fresh and exciting to me."

As with any actor and the character they play, Lawrence's relationship with Sandy has evolved and changed over the years. "Part of the struggle early on was I [was] so high energy when I play her that they always asked me to slow down. I was always talking too fast. I remember Steve Hillenburg used to hold up a sign to me at the recording studio

that said, 'Slow Down!' It was like, 'I can't slow down; I'm a squirrel!'"

Texan Treasure

And Sandy's not just any squirrel — she has musical numbers to perform. "It was really fun and terrifying at the same time, because I really wanted it to be good, and I'm not a naturally fantastic singer — even though I do think singing as a squirrel gives you some freedom," Lawrence says.

Sandy has always been known to be from Texas, though the specifics of her background have never been well defined — until now.

"Early on, it was interesting because they were concerned about her accent, and they were worried that the kids viewing wouldn't understand certain words," Lawrence says. "I would kind of have to come in and out of the accent if they thought something wasn't clear, but I feel like as the show's gone on, they've given me more free rein just to play her however it happens."

After all this time, Sandy's become more than just a character to her fans — and to Lawrence. "I didn't realize this until today, actually, that watching it, I no longer felt like it was an animated character or a live-action character. It is so beautiful," she says. "Oh, my gosh, I'm so lucky!" ♦

***Saving Bikini Bottom: The Sandy Cheeks Movie* premieres on Netflix on August 2.**



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SCAN ME



Nautical Nonsense With Heart!

SpongeBob SquarePants celebrates 25 years of hilarious, absorbent fun.

1999

was a big year for animation: While major features such as Disney's *Tarzan*, Pixar's *Toy Story 2* and Brad Bird's *The Iron Giant* opened in theaters, the TV and cable scene was also blazing with influential shows such as *Batman Beyond*, *Family Guy*, *Futurama* and *Ed, Edd n Eddy*.

But among the many animated shows that premiered 25 years ago, none has had the lasting power or pop culture impact as Nickelodeon's *SpongeBob SquarePants*. Created by the much-loved former marine biologist Stephen Hillenburg, the highly original, funny and easy-to-love series quickly became the animated show that everyone wanted to emulate but, frankly, never even came close to repeating its special kind of magic.

Sadly, Hillenburg passed away at 57 from ALS in 2018, but his legacy continues to shine today. The series is now in its 15th season on Nickelodeon, and its two spinoff series, *Kamp Koral: SpongeBob's Under Years* and *The Patrick Star Show*, are faring well with audiences too. There have been three clever, successful movies — *The SpongeBob SquarePants Movie* (2004), *Sponge Out of Water* (2015) and *Sponge on the Run* (2020) — and a new one (*Saving Bikini Bottom: The Sandy Cheeks Movie*) premieres on Netflix this month. The streamer also announced that another feature, *Plankton: The Movie*, is in the works for 2025. To date, *SpongeBob* has won six Annie Awards, four Emmys, two BAFTA Children's awards and has also inspired an acclaimed Broadway musical that premiered in 2017. And the optimistic yellow sponge's entertainment empire shows no signs of losing its global appeal.

As showrunners and exec producers Marc Ceccarelli and Vincent Waller — CalArts grads who have been with the show since 1999



— see it, there's no shortage of ideas or adventures for SpongeBob and his delightfully eccentric pals.

"It's quite amazing as we now have crew members who grew up watching the show, so they're taking all that knowledge and bringing [it] into the new episodes," says Waller, who worked as a storyboard artist on such shows as *The Ren & Stimpy Show*, *Duckman* and *Cow and Chicken* before joining the *SpongeBob* team during its first season. He became the show's

creative director during Season 4, and in 2015, he became supervising producer and showrunner with Ceccarelli. "You put all the pain and the joy in your life into the show: That's where comedy comes from, and nobody tells us, 'Oh, that's too weird ... you can't do that!'"

Ceccarelli, a key member of the *SpongeBob* team since the start, agrees. "We've been so lucky, because this show, from its very inception with Steve [Hillenburg], has always been kind of about creativity and imagination. So, it

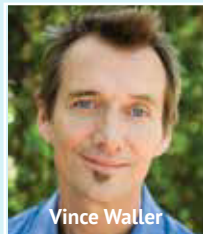


'I think that the attitude of the show is about tolerance. Everybody is different, and the show embraces that. The character SpongeBob is an oddball. He's kind of weird, but he's kind of special.'

- Stephen Hillenburg



Marc Ceccarelli



Vince Waller



MUST-SEA SPONGEBOB: (Top row, from left) "Chocolate With Nuts," "Pizza Delivery," "The Fry Cook Game," (second row) "Welcome to the Chum Bucket," "Band Geek," "Rock Bottom," (third row) "The Algae's Always Greener," "Frankendoodle" and "Graveyard Shift" are some of the best-loved episodes of the series throughout its 25-year run.



allows us to take the lid off and just pour as much into it as we possibly can. We're always trying new things to keep it fresh and alive with imagination."

Of course, making audiences laugh has always been the show's most important goal. "Our main mandate has always been to be funny," adds Ceccarelli. "We don't have to include messages or to teach children anything. We make a show that's generally funny for a general audience, so everything's laser-pointed on trying to find the funny in every scene. Each department's goal is to make a scene funnier — from the writing to the storyboarding to the designs for the props. We're making the show for ourselves first. We're the test audience, and if it cracks us up, then we go ahead with it."

Waller adds, "I can't tell you how many times parents come up to me whenever we're doing signings or when they just find out I'm working on the show and they tell us, 'Thank you for making something I can watch too and not want to kill myself!'"

When it comes to the series' stunning longevity, both Waller and Ceccarelli both believe that the unique characters dreamed up by Hillenburg a quarter-century ago play a big part in keeping the spark alive.

"SpongeBob is completely undaunted in anything and everything he does," says Waller. "He is naive and has this pure heart, and just

like Steve, he is always striving to make the world a better place. Plus, all the other characters are just the perfect supporting cast. It's like there's truly something for everybody, and we have the best cast I've ever worked with. It's so completely well rounded, and you're hitting all the bells as you go along."

Ceccarelli says, "The fact that you have such a pure-hearted character at the center of it makes the show a completely uncynical, positive experience, even though a lot of the humor points out society's foibles. But at the same time, you're always looking at it through these rose-colored glasses worn by this naive, special little character."

Waller believes that the late 1990s and early 2000s was a special time for TV animation because creators were allowed to run free with their ideas. "I might have a stilted point of view, but there was a big cartoon explosion that happened after *Ren & Stimpy*. People actually saw what you could get when you actually let cartoonists have the power and run with it; they'll give you gold."

"That's what blew my mind when I was at CalArts," recalls Ceccarelli. "When *Ren & Stimpy* came out, I was in the live-action program, and I thought, 'Boy, did I make a big mistake!' I should have been in the animation program. That's why it took me 10 years to claw my way into animation!"

When asked about their favorite memories

of working with Hillenburg, the two animation veterans have similar answers. Waller says, "Just hearing him laugh was the best. It wasn't easy. It was hard to make him laugh. As they say, a laugh from a comedy writers' room is a 'HA!' That's like other people's falling over and dying laughing."

"Exactly, because we're all kind of like comedy scientists," explains Ceccarelli. "You are all putting the special formulas together. It's great when you hear that a joke gets unprompted laughter."

The duo has some important words of advice for animation hopefuls who want to have a long and rewarding career. Waller offers an easy mantra. "Draw, draw, draw!" he says. "And don't be a jerk to work with!"

Ceccarelli adds, "What I've found out about this business is that it's filled with really intelligent, thoughtful people, but they're also really kind. It's really a unique bunch of people. So, if you're going to join this group of people, try and be the best version of yourself."

"Remember that it's always a group effort," says Waller. "The great thing is that everybody gets to add something. Other people call it cleanup, but we call it *plusers*, because they're not just making it a nicer drawing: They're also adding more storytelling elements to the action or making the acting and comedy come through the action. Every job in the pipeline is important."



MAKING WAVES:

SpongeBob SquarePants has often charted new waters, including (top left) live hosting Super Bowl LVIII with animated characters and (bottom left) the stop-motion special "It's a SpongeBob Christmas!" (2012). At right, the cast (L-R: Bill Fagerbakke, Rodger Bumpass, Tom Kenny, Mr. Lawrence, Clancy Brown, Carolyn Lawrence) and their characters.



Stephen Hillenburg on *SpongeBob's Beginnings*

An excerpt from an interview with Hillenburg by Ben Beaumont Thomas in *The Observer*:

I was into Jacques Cousteau as a kid and started scuba diving around 14, which blew my mind. I studied natural resources planning and thought I could get a job at some marine park. But I was great at art and so-so at marine biology. It's funny how the two eventually came together. I got a job on a Nickelodeon cartoon, *Rocko's Modern Life*. I had written an educational comic book about tide pools called *The Intertidal Zone*, which had a talking sponge. One of the guys saw it and said: "This should be your own show."

In the comic, the character was a natural sponge, but I thought an artificial square sponge was funnier. SpongeBob is just made of cellulose, but he has parents who are natural sponges — he got the square gene. The original name was Spongeboy, but I couldn't use that because it was copyrighted by a mop company. I eventually thought of SpongeBob, but he needed a last name. SquarePants came to mind.

I then came up with the other characters. I wanted Patrick the starfish to be really stupid, the perfect friend, because SpongeBob is an innocent, and he doesn't think Patrick is dumb. So when these two guys get together, it's like fire and gas. Squidward, meanwhile, lives between SpongeBob and Patrick. He's the one in the middle getting driven crazy.

I wanted SpongeBob to love his job. I always imagined a kid going into McDonald's and seeing a guy cooking and thinking it was the best job in the world: "You can eat hamburgers all the time!" I had just been to Tahiti and that influenced the flowers in the sky, while the tiki elements, like the pineapple SpongeBob lives in, are influenced by Hawaii.

When I pitched the show, I made this special seashell. You could pick it up and hear me singing: "Spongeboy, Spongeboy!" I also made an aquarium with Patrick planted on the side, SpongeBob sitting on a barrel and Squidward inside. I wore a Hawaiian shirt. I don't know what they thought of it. Eventually, we pitched with a storyboard. The executive, Albie Hecht, walked out — then walked straight back in and said: "Let's make this." ♦

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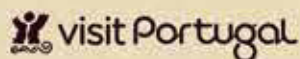
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Absorbent Memories

Super-versatile *SpongeBob* actor Tom Kenny looks back at his alter ego's legacy.



The optimistic sponge who lives in a pineapple under the sea has made a huge impact on the lives of everyone who brought him to animated life 25 years ago. But perhaps nobody's career has been more defined and affected by the show's huge success than Tom Kenny, the brilliant man who has voiced SpongeBob on the show, the movies and all its many incarnations. Kenny, who has won two Daytime Emmy Awards and two Annies — and also voices various other characters on the show (including Gary the Snail, the live-action Patchy the Pirate and SpongeBob's dad, Harold) — says he feels a mix of puzzlement and gratitude when he thinks about the longevity and rewards of his amazing job.

"We could not have foreseen this when we first started doing the show," the always-charming and hilarious Kenny tell us during a recent Zoom interview. "It's wonderful to see that *SpongeBob* is still resonating with people who first experienced it in their formative years," he says. "Now they're in their 30s, and they tell us that show taught them a lot in terms of dealing with the world. We

weren't thinking about that when we're doing a stupid knockabout comedy and just having fun. But the show has kind of deeper purpose and meaning too."

Can you take us back to the early days when you first started to work with *SpongeBob* creator Stephen Hillenburg?

Tom Kenny: I met Stephen years before *SpongeBob* on *Rocko's Modern Life*: He was the creative director on that show, and I was the voice of the steer who hung out with Rocko the wallaby. Steve and I just instantly liked each other and bonded. He'd come and see me do stand-up comedy. When he came up with the idea for *SpongeBob*, he thought of me first and he cast me without even an audition, which is quite unusual. Then, he went on to cast the rest of main characters. Somehow, he convinced the network to go with me. They were perhaps advocating to cast a famous star as the lead, but he just shut that down, and they went with me.

Steve and I were close, and we'd hang out socially. We'd catch music together, and he was such a well-rounded guy. I didn't surf or

paint like he did, but the Venn diagram of our interests intersected in enough areas. One of the interesting things about those early days of the show, every time we would record with the cast, Steve would come over to our side of the glass and sit with the actors. He was always in the trenches with us. When he passed away from ALS, it was a real tragedy and came totally out of left field. We miss him every day and try to think about him and still think of doing the characters the way he would approve. He was a very wonderful, intuitive, gentle person and a very strong creator who knew what he wanted and would advocate for that to the powers that be when necessary. I learned so much from him, and it was Steve who made me the voice director of the show. I told him I've never done that before, but he said you can handle it. He was always pushing himself and everybody around him. I'm so grateful that I knew him and so disappointed that he had to leave this realm so early.

What are some of your favorite memories of the past 25 years?

There are a lot of memories, but really it's all



THE GENIUS BEHIND THE SPONGE: (Left) *SpongeBob*'s creator Stephen Hillenburg (1961-2016) was a former marine biologist who was deeply influenced by French oceanographer Jacques Cousteau as a child. (Right) The Emmy-winning voice of *SpongeBob*, Tom Kenny.



about just being these characters. That has remained the same, whether we were doing the show using cel animation or using digital or CG animation or voicing the characters using motion-capture technology, like we did at the Super Bowl and we'll do again at the Kids' Choice Awards this year. The characters are still the same. That's the beauty of animation: Familiarity does not breed contempt. I'm friends with Bob Odenkirk, and he says when you look at *Better Call Saul*, it's all about the character arc and how he got to be where he is. For *SpongeBob*, we don't want these characters to be anything other than what they are and [have] always been. We don't need to add Cajun spice or lemon-flavored *SpongeBob* and Patrick. We don't have reboots or re-imaginings. We're not chasing trends, and there are people who find that comforting.

What we couldn't have foreseen in 1999 was that a six-year old who was watching the show would grow up, get married and have kids, and now they're watching the show with their kids and significant others. I feel so lucky that *SpongeBob* has taken me to all these places, and I stumbled into this perfect job for me that fits my personality and weirdness.

Favorites Episodes: My favorite episodes of the show tend to be the early ones, because I used to watch the show with my kids, who

are now 21 and 26. It always feels a bit weird to watch yourself because you don't want to be this Johnny Egomaniac! But with the kids, they'd be watching TV and I'd walk into the room and watch the episodes. When I did live-action work before, I hated to watch myself afterward because I would want to do some reverse engineering and do things differently perhaps.

Some of the episodes that ended up being my favorites: I love the "Band Geeks" episode (Season 2, Episode 15B) because that's one of the only times Squidward gets a happy ending. Another one is "Sailor Mouth" (Season 2, Episode 18A), where *SpongeBob* and Patrick learn a naughty word and go around using it and freaking out the adults in their lives. Then, the "Sweet Victory" song got us to the Super Bowl twice. I also love the "Chocolate With Nuts" episode where *SpongeBob* and Patrick are door-to-door chocolate salesmen. My favorite episodes haven't changed since the beginning, but I think that the writers, the animators and the cast are all doing really good work on current episodes. I don't have grandkids yet — Bill [Fagerbakke], who voices Patrick, just had his first grandkid, so I'm guessing that kid will probably be watching *SpongeBob* in four years!

On the Show's Legacy: It's so wonderful to have new kids discovering the show every day and merging onto this great *SpongeBob* freeway! When I go to Comic-Cons, sometimes I meet four generations of people who are fans of the show. I hear from people that tell me that *SpongeBob* helped form their sense of humor. Then, they made friends who laughed at the same kind of stuff they did, or they met their significant other because they both liked the show.

As a character, *SpongeBob* has always been about just being who you are and not giving a fig about what the outside world thinks about you. I think that's a very helpful message for people to glean from the show at any stage of their lives, which is, "Who cares? You be you and let your freak flag fly!" I'm proud of that legacy, because we need more positive thoughts like that in our world. We all know with social media, it's so much harder to cope with mean-spiritedness around us. And we thought things were tough in 1999! Little did we know that the race to the bottom would be so precipitous. So, I'm just happy to provide that space for people to just laugh at stupid, silly, goofy stuff and share it with others. Thank goodness that Steve created this show and put his fingerprints on something that is still around and inspires us years after he left us. ♦

HOLY NOIRISH COMEBACK, BATMAN!

Bruce Timm and James Tucker give us a preview of their much-anticipated new series, *Batman: Caped Crusader*.

By Jeff Spry



Evoking noir nostalgia and a blue-collar bravado that feels both modern and vintage, executive producer Bruce Timm and Warner Bros.' new hardboiled animated series, *Batman: Caped Crusader*, swings onto Prime Video's platform in August.

It's a pulpy 10-episode gem emerging as a natural evolution of Timm's work on *Batman: The Animated Series*, *Batman Beyond* and numerous other

DC Animated Universe films and specials. This time around, the project is backed by super-producer JJ. Abrams and *The Batman* director Matt Reeves, who are the series' executive producers.

We had the chance to chat with Timm and his executive producing partner, James Tucker, to take the Batmobile for a spin around this brooding Batman project, which was smoothly animated by two of South Korea's finest, Studio IAM and Studio Grida.

Strong, Silent and Weird

"James [Abrams] and I were both in on it from the beginning," Timm tells *Animation Magazine*. "Our bosses at Warner Bros. basically pitched the idea to me and said, 'Hey, how'd you like to go back and do some more *Batman: The Animated Series*?' I wasn't too keen on the idea. If I was going to go back and revisit any of my previous shows, I was more interested in doing *Justice League*, because I felt like there was a lot more stuff we



'He's not just scary looking with his bat costume, but he's odd, personality-wise: He's not friendly, he's very remote, doesn't talk much. That was the version I pitched to writers, but everybody had a hard time wrapping their heads around that character.'

— Creator/exec producer Bruce Timm

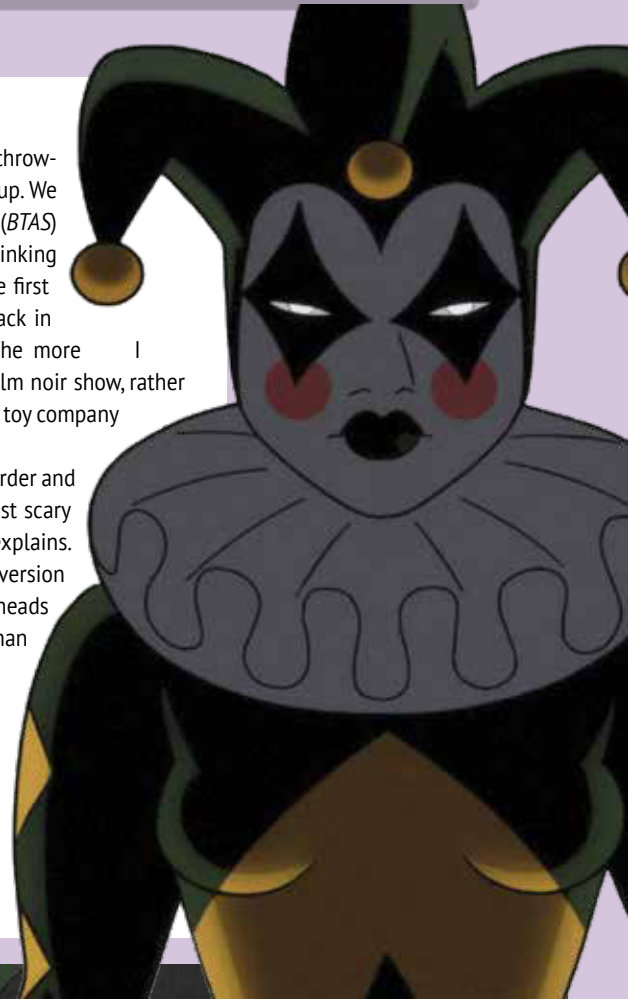
could have done within that format."

He adds, "We'd done *Justice League*, so we got together and were throwing ideas back and forth, and the subject of Batman kept coming up. We didn't want to just go back and do *Batman: The Animated Series* (BTAS) again and directly compete with stuff we did 30 years ago. But, in thinking back on it, there was a whole bunch of stuff I didn't get to do the first time that I could do this time. When I originally pitched BTAS back in 1990, it was pretty different than what ended up on screen. The more I thought about it, it was [initially] more of a pulp, serial, mystery, film noir show, rather than having to make it accessible to seven-year-olds and make the toy company happy."

Timm says his original idea of how to treat Batman was a lot weirder and more like old-pulp heroes such as The Shadow. "[Batman's] not just scary looking with his bat costume, but he's odd, personality-wise," he explains. "He's not friendly, he's very remote, doesn't talk much. That was the version I pitched to writers, but everybody had a hard time wrapping their heads around that character. They eventually made Batman more human than I would have liked."

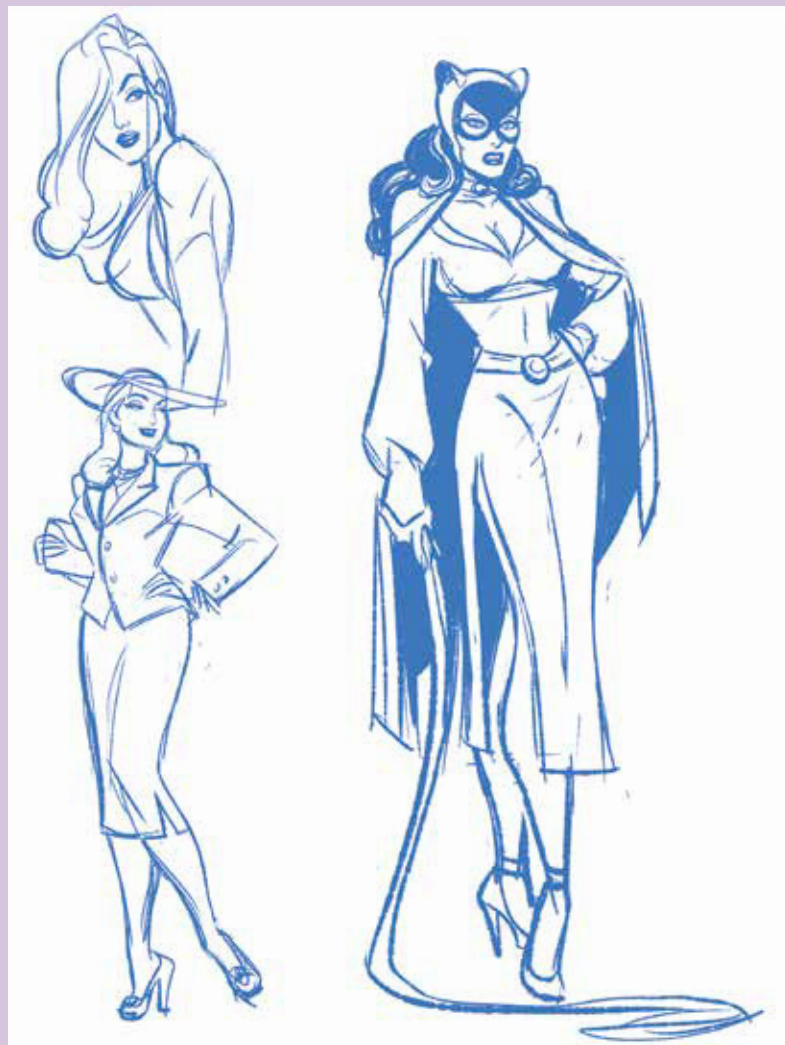
Dashing forward, Warner Bros. Animation gave Timm a call and delivered news that JJ. Abrams and Matt Reeves were thinking about executive producing this new Batman show with him. Timm immediately brought James on board after their fruitful *Justice League* partnership.

"I pitched them my idea of the 'Man of Few Words' Batman, and they thought it sounded really weird and interesting," Timm adds.



A VERY BAD GIRL: The Dark Knight (voiced by Hamish Linklater) faces Harley Quinn/Harleen Quinzel (voiced by Jamie Chung) in this summer's *Batman: Caped Crusader*.

[All images courtesy of Warner Bros. Animation]



CLAWS OUT: Catwoman/Selina Kyle (voiced by Christina Ricci) is in purrrfect form in Bruce Timm, J.J. Abrams and Matt Reeves' new take on DC's caped crusader.

"My main influence would be horror films from the 1930s and '40s and film noir from the 1940s. They both said, 'You're speaking our language; that sounds great.' And we were off to the races."

From the moment the black-and-white opening titles grace the screen, accompanied by Frederik Wiedmann's haunting score, this classy production delivers us into the shadowy realm of Gotham City and its nocturnal prowlers. We drift back to a pre-World War II era of streamlined sedans, Tommy guns and felt fedoras that delivers all the trappings of a classic film noir movie.

The superb vocal cast features Hamish Linklater (Bruce Wayne/Batman), Diedrich Bader (Harvey Dent), Eric Morgan Stuart (Commissioner Gordon), Krystal Joy Brown (Barbara Gordon), John

DiMaggio (Bullock), Jason Watkins (Alfred Pennyworth), Minnie Driver (Oswalda Cobblepot/Penguin), Christina Ricci (Catwoman) and Jamie Chung (Harley Quinn).

Tucker wasn't around for the original *Batman: The Animated Series* in the '90s and missed that first go-around when the series was centered around gangsters and had noir influence but tonally wasn't full noir.

"This new show is really noir and leans into that more because we don't have to worry about kids," Tucker says. "It's a full-circle moment for me getting to work on it, because it has the film noir influences and the Universal horror influences. We're trying to honor the look of a 1940s movie with the fashions and jargon, the cars and archi-

tecture and hats and shoulder pads."

Here, Batman's design cuts a striking silhouette in this absorbing original show and harkens back to earlier iterations of the Caped Crusader from Golden Age comic books and matinee Batman serials of yesteryear, complete with feral elongated ears and sharp cape angles, all served up with a furious array of fisticuffs and infestation of criminal masterminds and henchmen.

Knowing that they couldn't just replicate the same character designs from decades ago, Timm and his team created a retooled Caped Crusader that stood out from previous examples.

"One of the inspirations was definitely going back to the earliest Batman comics, the ones Bob Kane and his ghosts did," Timm explains. "You



look at them now and they're crude, but there's certain things about Batman visually that were very distinctive for that first year of his run. He had bigger ears, and they stuck out more to the sides. He had short gloves and tall boots, and his trunks were longer. So, we basically used that as a starting point and then stylized it so it would still look good on the screen but show the influences of the old original comics."

Careful attention to period detail, calculated design aesthetics and an authentic color palette were all tossed into the recipe to give *Batman: Caped Crusader* a tantalizing flavor.

"We shoot this Batman differently than *BTAS* as well, because we keep the camera away from him," says Tucker. "We pull back and keep him in the distance to echo that remoteness in his personality. *BTAS* was a lot of close-ups. We were inside his head a lot, and for this we didn't want people to know what he was thinking all the time or to see his emotion."

This detached style of camerawork that elicits a primal response and adds character depth was something Timm learned from Alex Toth, the legendary animation designer and comic book artist.

"I was a pen pal of his in the mid-'90s and he was a big fan of *BTAS*, but he did have some criticisms and one of them was about those close-ups," Timm recalls. "Why are you always giving us those damn close-ups of Batman? The animation drawings don't look that good when you're that close to

them.' At one point, he was in line to do DC's *The Shadow* comic. If he'd gotten that gig, he would never have put *The Shadow* in close-up; he was always going to try and keep *The Shadow* at arm's length or further so you would not get comfortable with him. He's not a person, he's an idea, a myth almost. I always remembered that. So, we experimented with that on this show and the more we did it, the more we liked it. It was really cool."

Caped Crusader's animation is mainly drawn by hand, and the vehicles are done with CG models. The team also employed digital tools for the special effects and lighting techniques.

"Bruce, thankfully, allowed me to do what I like most on this project, which is character design," Tucker adds. "I primarily started out doing character design, reimagining some of the characters, the supporting cast and some of the villains. I'm a huge noir fan too, so I tried to bring a lot of what I knew about noir to the design. As I got deeper into the production, I started taking on more producer-type duties."

Delightful Adversaries

On the villains front, Timm and Tucker tinkered with two of the most prominent troublemakers in this series, Catwoman and Clayface.

"The thing about Catwoman is that there have been so many different versions of her over the years, from the Julie Newmar version to the *BTAS* version to the Anne Hathaway version," Timm says.

"So, we always start from a point of let's do the thing that's the most un-*BTAS*-like, because that's what everybody is going to be expecting. James and I are both big fans of Golden Age comics, and the farthest away from the *BTAS* Catwoman is the early comics version of her. She's got a long skirt and green cape, and she's got a whip. We settled on this spoiled-heiress version of her. She's in it for fun and to steal stuff to fund her lifestyle. So, she's a bit more of a screwball comedy character, which is weird in this world, but it makes sense within a '40s framework. She's a lot of fun and one of my favorite characters in the show."

For Clayface, as much as they loved the earlier *BTAS* iteration where he's portrayed as a shape-shifting mud monster, Timm knew they didn't want to replicate that depiction.

"Going back to the Golden Age again, the very first Clayface was a guy named Basil Karlo who's based on the old horror movie actors," Timm says. "So that's playing our song, we loved that. Right now, we're working on Season 2 as we speak, and we have a two-season commitment for 20 episodes, and possibly more, so we'll see. Batman was always my favorite superhero because there are so many different kinds of Batman. A show like this doesn't come around every day. Stars aligned." ♦

***Batman: Caped Crusader* premieres on Prime Video on August 1.**



Life with the Familia

Primos series creator Natasha Kline discusses the goals and inspirations of her heartwarming new Disney show.

By Karen Idelson



When Natasha Kline was growing up in the Inland Empire, she was an introvert who liked to plan how she would spend her time.

That's exactly when her mom would invite a group of her cousins over to be together and play.

All that togetherness — the wonderful times and the annoying ones — inspired *Primos*, the animated show Kline created for Disney, which premieres this month after several years in development. The show follows Tater, an exceptional 10-year-old girl, through her adventures with a dozen cousins (*primos* in Spanish) who have been invited by her mom to move in for the summer. The show's characters, storylines and backdrop all draw from Kline's childhood growing up in an extended multicultural family in Fontana, California.

The series also draws from an adult short she made while working with the alternative stand-up comedy troupe, Upright Citizens Brigade.

Kline is also a veteran director with an impressive resume that includes more than two dozen episodes of *Big City Greens* (Disney Channel). Moreover, she worked on *The LEGO Ninjago Movie* and the YouTube series *Ollie & Scoops*. She is *Primos'* producer and creator. Philip Cohen (*Penguins of Madagascar*) is also a producer on the show, and production's animation partners are Snipple Animation Studios and Sugarcube Animation Studio.

Unpacking Childhood Memories

"I pitched [*Primos*] in 2017 and then 2019 is when I finally started development," says Kline. "I was literally in the office developing it for just a few months before the pandemic

struck. So, I moved into my house, and it was a really cool experience being able to do that, because it was being in this amazing creativity cocoon where it was just me and my ideas kind of bouncing around. It was also fun to bring my actual family into it, too. It was an opportunity to reach out to them and ask if they have any memories from childhood [that] they think would be cool for me to show."

As Kline's family members began sending her their own stories and memories, she developed a huge Google Doc. "That's kind of how we launched the writers' room," she recalls. "I just gave them this Google Doc full of ideas as a starting point. We didn't have to stick to them, but they were some springboards that we could use to see where we could go. They had a lot of amazing memories that I had actually forgotten. It was really fun to look through the treasure trove of their



'My hope for Tater [the lead] is that she would become a comedic character who is fun to watch. I would love for kids to take away is that you can dream big, no matter what walk of life you come from.'

— Producer & creator Natasha Kline



AN AUTHENTIC VOICE:

Disney's new animated series *Primos* is based on creator Natasha Kline's own experiences of growing up as a Latina with her cousins in L.A.'s Inland Empire.



memories."

Kline also wanted to represent the Inland Empire as closely as possible in the series. When she began to interview art directors for the show, she found a kindred partner in Ivan Aguirre, who also grew up around the same time and same area as her. Both of them were from multicultural backgrounds and wanted to make a show that spoke to their experiences as children.

Once on the show, Aguirre began creating environments steeped in the color palette and warm light that defined the neighborhoods where he and Kline lived and where Tater's story takes place.

His inspirations came from many places: "I've always loved Sylvain Chomet movies, like *The Triplets of Belleville*," says Aguirre. "I always loved how realistic it felt, but also how wonky it felt because it kind of had a hand-drawn line to it. And a good friend of mine is Willie Real, who's a Mexican American artist from the Bay Area: His sketchbook drawings have an amazing line to them. I also loved the

shapes and the lines in *101 Dalmatians*, so these were the influences on the show. Ultimately, we wanted to make something very nostalgic and [which] kind of feels homemade. The whole story takes place in Natasha's childhood and in the summertime. So, I wanted the palettes to feel warm. Whenever there's a window, there's always a pool of light coming in and there's kind of almost a dreamy sort of aesthetic to it."

The show is made up of several different art styles, including ones for the real world where Tater lives, the fantasy world of Tater's imagination and the diary world where Tater's diary comes to life. (Kline kept a diary when she was growing up and added this detail to Tater's life.)

Kline loved embedding the details of her childhood in the characters, storytelling and



look of the show. She also wanted the voice cast to reflect on her memories.

Myrna Velasco (*DC Super Hero Girls*) plays Tater; Melissa Villaseñor (*Saturday Night Live*) is Tater's little sister, Nellie; Michelle Ortiz (*This Fool*) voices Tater's mother, Bibi; Jim Conroy (*The Casagrandes*) voices Tater's father, Bud; and Angélica María (*The Book of Life*) plays Tater's grandmother, Buena.

"That thing I was looking for [in casting the voice actors] was nostalgia, the person who could strike the sound of the person they were playing," says Kline. "When they found Angélica María and I listened to her audition and she had the accent and everything just right, I started crying because she sounded exactly like Buena. It was like she was right there talking in my ear."

With the music, Kline wanted to surround the show with sounds and songs that kept the



TRUE COLORS: *Primos* presents the world of the main character and her family in a watercolor, quasi-storybook style which also reflects the backgrounds of show creator Natasha Kline and art director Ivan Aguirre.



spirit of the stories and animation in mind. She found her choice through Disney's music department.

"When I was growing up, music was a big thing in our house," says Kline. "MTV was a huge thing in our house. It was the late 1980s and early 1990s and that was music video time. I would think that if I was going to make a show, I wanted to make a music video. Disney's music department is amazing, and they brought me all these choices. The person I ultimately picked was Alana Da Fonseca. It's kind of impossible to say how talented she is. Every time she sends me a new demo, it's jaw-dropping because she's able to tap into whatever the feeling of the scene is. We've done a lot of pop songs for the show, and we

also did a country song. We've done stuff that has more Mexican or Latino influence, too."

For both Kline and Aguirre, their personal influences play a tremendous part in what makes the show meaningful for them. They're both hopeful that kids who come from multicultural backgrounds will see themselves in the show and that it will make them feel seen and acknowledged.

Ties That Bind

As creator of the show, Kline wants kids to feel the sense of joy she had with her cousins, growing up as part of a large extended family. Now that many of her cousins live far away, she misses them and the fun they had.

"My hope for Tater is that she would be-

come a comedic character who is fun to watch," says Kline. "I know she has a lot of big expressions and a lot of cartoony takes. I think, ultimately, what I would love for kids to take away from her is that you can dream big, no matter what walk of life you come from. It's important to have aspirations for yourself. No matter who you are, where you are, you as a human being can aspire to whatever you want, and your community and your family are there to support you." ♦

***Primos* premieres on the Disney Channel on July 25 at 8 p.m. The first nine episodes will stream on Disney+ on July 26. Following the premiere, two new episodes will debut weekly on Saturday mornings at 9 a.m. from July 27.**

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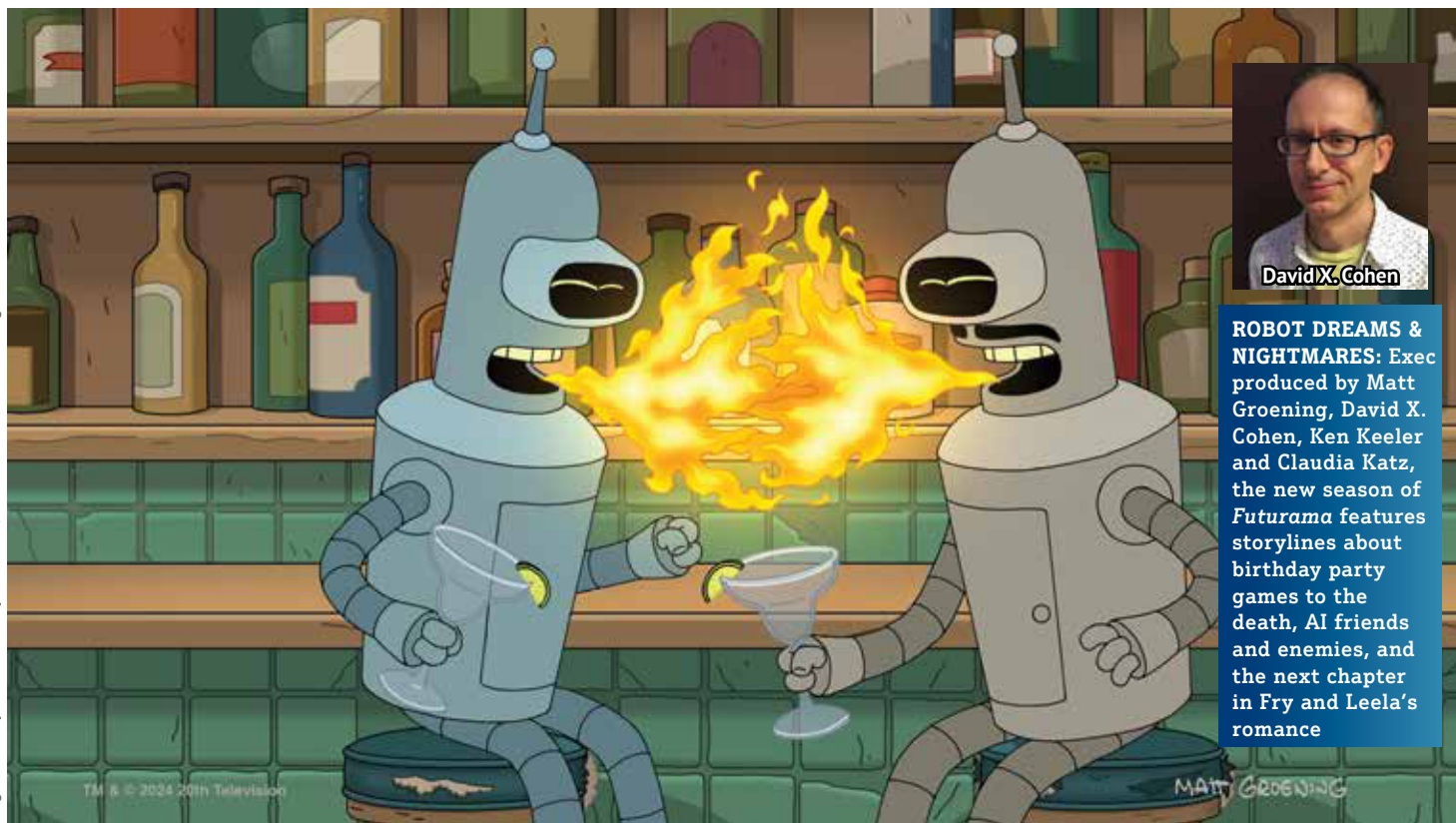
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Return to Planet Express

Futurama's longtime showrunner & head writer David X. Cohen gives us the scoop on the popular show's 12th glorious season.



David X. Cohen

ROBOT DREAMS & NIGHTMARES: Exec produced by Matt Groening, David X. Cohen, Ken Keeler and Claudia Katz, the new season of *Futurama* features storylines about birthday party games to the death, AI friends and enemies, and the next chapter in Fry and Leela's romance

The world around us may be falling apart, and we might be experiencing one of the hottest summers ever. But there are still things we can all get behind and celebrate, and the arrival of the brand-spanking-new 12th season of *Futurama* on Hulu (July 29) is certainly on top of that list. To mark the occasion, we had the great opportunity to interview the show's brilliant showrunner/head writer David X. Cohen (*The Simpsons*, *Disenchantment*) who, along with Matt Groening, has been the driving force behind the six-time Emmy-winning show since its premiere on FOX 25 years ago. Here is what he told us:

Congrats on delivering yet another season of our favorite sci-fi animated series. How do you feel about this accomplishment?



David X. Cohen: Great! Much more fun than in 2023, when we were in the middle of the Writers and Actors Guilds' strikes, and I could not even discuss the premiere of the show. Just try to shut me up this time!

What are some highlights of the new season that you can talk about?

The season starts with a couple of huge, ambitious episodes. In the season premiere, Bender

makes an emotional return to his ancestral Mexican robot village, where Danny Trejo has a hilarious guest appearance as Bender's cousin, Doblando. And the second episode, "Quid's Game" is a monster, featuring no fewer than 34 of your favorite *Futurama* characters attending a surreal replay of Fry's emotional eighth birthday party. Except this time, the party games are played ... to the death.

Last year, you were able to tackle some topical issues, as well as bring back some favorite characters and storylines from previous seasons. Will we continue to see the trend?

We certainly tried! One of my favorites of the upcoming season explores the disturbing future of fast fashion, with a major guest role for Cara Delevingne, who was truly fantastic. (She



INTERGALACTIC LAUGHS: Fry, Leela, Bender and the rest of the gang continue their adventures in the 12th season of *Futurama*. John DiMaggio, Billy West, Katey Sagal, Tress MacNeille, Maurice LaMarche, Lauren Tom, Phil LaMarr and David Herman return to provide the voices for the main characters.



also volunteered to play an owl in several other episodes, which we took her up on.) And of course, AI continues to be big news in the 31st century, as Leela ends up becoming close friends with an AI chatbot who happens to suffer from a few major programming errors. And I don't know if this is exactly topical — but we will be exploring the epic sci-fi story ... of coffee.

What were some of the most surprising reactions you received from the past season?

Generally, people were pretty kind with their reviews, so no complaints. A few reviewers called us out for a little too much fan service, which is fair; coming back after a decade or so,

we felt like we had to unwind a few tangled threads at the start of the first episode. But I think it fell back into the groove fairly quickly.

Why do you think the show has been so successful and popular for so long?

The longevity of *The Simpsons* taught us to plan for the possibility of a long existence. We work hard to base our episodes on the characters' emotions and on long-term human themes and struggles that are not too reliant on references to specific

current events or current pop culture. The sci-fi angle allows us to deal with current issues by analogy ("robot equality," say), which makes it a little harder to pin down the actual date of production once the immediate inspiration starts fading into history.

Favorite episodes of all time?

I always feel proudest when we earn a tear from the audience. It's a high degree of difficulty — you need viewers to be deeply invested in the emotions of characters who exist in an insane, animated, sci-fi setting. So, episodes like "Luck of the Fryish" and "Meanwhile" are my favorites.

What is the biggest way the show has changed in the 25 years?

The process was much more difficult in the early years, before we quite knew what combination of science fiction and comedy was possible. Initially, it wasn't clear to us that we could do a real ("serious"?) sci-fi story and still have it be funny. But over the years, we have found again and again that the more we respect the sci-fi angle, the more grand and epic the setting, the better the comedy plays against it, at least as long as we keep the characters' emotions believable and relevant to whatever strange circumstances they find themselves in, which has always been Matt Groening's No. 1 rule.

What is your take on the state of animation in 2024? What are you watching these days?

You won't be surprised to hear that I am pleased by the return of some old classics — *King of the Hill*, *Beavis and Butt-Head*, uhm, *Futurama*?! But of course, it takes some great new stuff to keep the medium alive. I just started watching *Scavengers Reign*, and my head exploded, in the good way.

What would have been your response if someone told you back in 1999 that you would still be working on new seasons of *Futurama* in 25 years?

I would have gasped, fainted, then immediately gotten back to work, since we were spending about 23 hours a day in the office at the time. ♦

The 12th season of *Futurama* premieres on Hulu on July 29.

Swinging Back into Action

Will Speck and Josh Gordon take us behind the scenes of Season 2 of their hit animated series, *Hit-Monkey*.

By Jeff Spry



Back in 2021, *Hit-Monkey* swung onto the adult animation scene from the pages of Marvel Comics and quickly became a bona fide sensation on Hulu.

This clever assassin-centric series was created by Will Speck and Josh Gordon (*Blades of Glory*; *Lyle, Lyle, Crocodile*) and is based on the cult crime comics from writer Daniel Way and Croatian artist Dalibor Talajić. It follows the wild homicidal adventures of a Japanese snow macaque whose family aids an injured hit man on the run named Bryce. When Bryce is killed by his enemies, this super-skilled primate swiftly takes up the addictive mantle of violence, aided by the deceased mercenary's ghost, to seek out revenge and retribution.

Hit-Monkey is produced by 20th Television Animation with animation duties courtesy of Floyd County Productions (*Archer*, *Dicktown*). Although the primary action in the debut season unfolded in the seedy heart of Tokyo's underworld, Hulu's recently released sophomore outing takes its martial arts madness to the corrupt corridors of New York City. Here, *Hit-Monkey* continues his murderous rampage

while discovering a way to end his destructive habits and Bryce tries to repair the damage to those souls he disappointed while alive.

The Reluctant Assassin

"One of the things we were excited to explore in Season 2 is that the show has always been a rumination on violence and the price you pay for a violent life," Gordon tells *Animation Magazine*. "In many ways, Bryce and Monkey are on parallel journeys this season. Bryce with his grown-up daughter and trying to resurrect the wrongs he's done in his life. And Monkey as he tries to escape this life of violence and killing that he doesn't particularly enjoy. That's always been the heart of the show and of the original comic. Monkey is a reluctant assassin. In many ways, this is a deeper emotional season, while at the same time being a funnier season."

Free to venture into uncharted territory in its second season, *Hit-Monkey's* brash humor, barbed sarcasm, bonanza of bullets and blood-stained stories are as evident as ever. Besides the returning vocal talents of Fred Tatasciore (*Hit-Monkey*), Jason Sudeikis (Bryce), Ally Maki

(Haruka), Olivia Munn (Akiko), newcomers include former *SNL* star Leslie Jones as Bryce's former agent, Eunice; Cristin Milioti as Bryce's abandoned daughter, Iris; and even a brilliant performance by Keith David as the Devil.

"Josh and I were always really touched by [*Hit-Monkey*] because he threads different elements of comedy, action and a real emotionality, and it's very rare to find that in any character, let alone a Japanese snow monkey," says Speck, who along with Gordon was nominated for an Oscar for their 1997 live-action short, *Culture*. "There was something very unique about the characters. In putting this together, what's been fun is building off the original graphic novel, but also inventing a world of characters and rules and building out what was already such a solid foundation. Being able to explore that feels really exciting, because it's taking a character to new places and having the freedom to do that. The second season, with him being in New York, was a great logical next step after the first season. We're hopeful that we can continue coming up with new worlds and inventing new futures for him and that really sparked us creatively."



'In putting this together, what's been fun is building off the original graphic novel, but also inventing a world of characters and rules and building out what was already such a solid foundation.'

— Co-executive producer Will Speck

Atlanta-based animation studio Floyd County is back on board for *Hit-Monkey* Season 2, as are animation director Jared Hickman and supervising director/co-exec producer Neal Holman, giving the bold series an organic continuity and consistency.

"The first season, because of COVID, took over two years," Gordon notes. "This one took less than a year-and-a-half. It's been a mad dash during the animation process, but it was kind of great getting back into these characters and moving them into a new city. 20th [Television] Animation came aboard as the main studio just because of a bandwidth thing, and they have a 30-plus-year history with animation, starting with *The Simpsons*. They're real pros and were a pleasure to work with."

Adding momentum to this fresh batch of 10 episodes is the fact that the team was lucky enough to be able to bring back the entire core vocal cast, including *Star Trek's* George Takei.

"Obviously, Jason Sudeikis is the core of the cast. Olivia Munn is amazing," says Gordon. "Fred Tatasciore is a legend and voices Hit-Monkey himself. Ally Maki has an expanded role this season. And then we were fortunate to get our first choices of all the actors we wanted to play the new characters. So, we have Leslie Jones playing Eunice, who is Jason Sudeikis' manager who now takes on Hit-Monkey as her client.

"And Cristin Milioti, who is incredible, plays

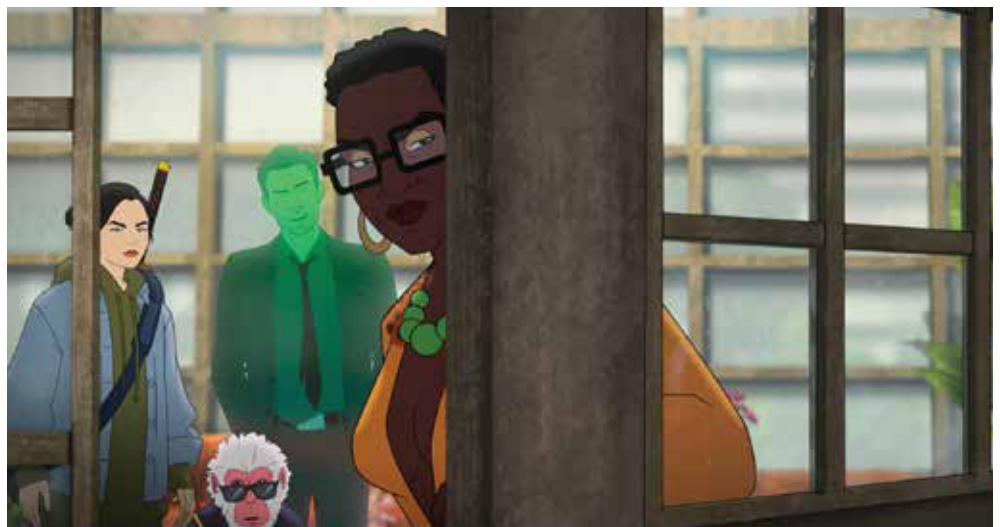
Bryce's grown daughter, and they have an emotional arc throughout the season. She's very funny and weird, playing this New York-y character. Then we also have Jim Gaffigan and Rob Corddry coming in to play roles. The fun is that you get to write these characters, and these people sort of invent them in the booth. We're used to live action, so directing animation is such a fun journey to go on with these actors."

Any time katana swords and high-caliber handguns are in play, thoughts naturally lead to the legacy of yakuza revenge films and old Westerns that often inspire Quentin Tarantino fare. As movie buffs heralding from NYU's Tisch School of the Arts, Gordon and Speck naturally

injected their film tastes into *Hit-Monkey*.

"The comedy blend within action was really exciting to us," Speck notes. "We obviously love Tarantino and Martin Scorsese, and the idea of action in service of character. In the comedic space, we love the modern masters of early '80s, such as Sydney Pollack, Mike Nichols and Hal Ashby, and those kinds of voices that were able to take a lot of dark subject matters that would otherwise be pretty intense and lighten their load with comedy." ♦

Both seasons of *Hit-Monkey* are currently streaming on Hulu. (Season 2 premiered on July 15.)



OUT OF THE PAST: The second season of *Hit-Monkey* relocates the action from Tokyo to New York City, where Monkey (Fred Tatasciore) deals with his new status as the "killer of killers," and Bryce (Jason Sudeikis) tries to repair the damage he incurred during his life.



Will Speck and Josh Gordon



Loving the Aliens

Exec producers Josh Bycel and Mike McMahan spill the beans on the exciting fifth season of Hulu's *Solar Opposites*.



Since its premiere in May 2020, *Solar Opposites* — Hulu's adult animated "silly aliens in suburbia" show has entertained audiences and surpassed expectations. This summer, the clever series is back for a fifth season, with what promises to be another glorious visit with Korvo, Terry, the Pupa and the rest of the surreal clan. Exec producers Mike McMahan and Josh Bycel were kind enough to give us the scoop on what we can look forward to this season.

"I think the big headline for the Solars' story this year is that Korvo and Terry are now married," says McMahan, who is also the creator/exec producer of *Star Trek: Lower Decks* and was an executive producer on *Rick and Morty*. "There were a lot of things we were able to look at that are about newlyweds. We were able to make fun of that fact that they are in love, so they can be total morons with each other. They're the exact right of stupid for each other and that makes us laugh. It's like

having two Homer Simpsons. We've just doubled up on the lovably dumb factor!"

Fortunately, the show will continue exploring the world inside The Wall (hidden in Jesse and Yumylack's bedroom). "We have the continuation of the epic story of the little people in The Wall," says McMahan. "They have this adventure in the backyard, and we get to explore a new genre with them. We also check in with the SilverCops and take that story to an unexpected place as well. So, as usual, one season of *Solar Opposites* is like grabbing a bunch of candy from a Halloween bucket and shoving them in your mouth all at once."

Return of the Little People

McMahan says "The Wall" storyline was always part of his plans for the show. "It was in the original pitch for the show and has always been a part of the DNA of the series" he explains. "When we started writing the first season, we always knew that the seventh episode was going to be about The Wall. Of course, we

didn't know at the time we'd be talking about Season 5 and that we'd go on to do it five times. But we tried to change the genre and really lean into it and build the serialized aspects of it, while still being so little, ironic and silly. We're really proud of what we've done on that side of the shelf!"

And yes, there's also a new cast member! "We added a new recurring character in the form of a little robot that they pick up, which just sticks around for the rest of the season," says McMahan. "It was fun for us to say, 'OK, now there's a robot in the family. So what does that mean for the Pupa?' We can't wait to see how fans react to that. We even call out how TV shows add cute things in later seasons, as if our robot was demanded by the network. The truth is that our network actually loves the show and we get to do whatever we want to do."

Bycel believes the series has been adept at further developing the sci-fi angle of its original premise. "We have a couple of really funny episodes that center on weird sci-fi device



OTHERWORLDLY LAUGHS:

According to *Solar Opposites* exec producers Mike McMahan and Josh Bycel, they have an abundance of storylines and ideas for the charming aliens in the future.

es," he says. "In one of the new episodes, we have this 'What If' device, which can show you what would come about if this happened. The Solars are fighting about something, and they go to push the What If device and they realize that it has already been pushed, so they are actually in a 'What If' world."

"We like to bend these classic situations," McMahan says. "The series is about an alien family, but it's also a show about all the TV shows that we've loved over the past few decades. So, what we do is take a classic TV trope and then break it and have our characters deal with the stupid version of that."

Bycel says he gets a big kick out of how the show mixes and matches animation styles and genres throughout a season. "From an animation standpoint, I love the amazing work done by our design artists and animators," says the exec producer, who has also worked on hit comedies such as *Scrubs*, *Psych*, *American Dad!* and *Happy Endings*. "We're asking them to make three different shows in one, and they can go from the fun, big bright colors of the Solars to a very different, dystopic kind of a world with the SilverCops, and then a completely another thing with The Wall and the backyard this season. For me, it's so much fun to be able to do all those things in one show. We've tasked our artists with what sometimes

seems like impossible tasks, but they also come to play and they're always so good."

Fans can also look forward to a colorful slate of guest voices this season. Clancy Brown, Charlotte Nicdao, Christina Hendricks, Darren Criss, Donald Faison, Greta Lee, Jack Quaid, Ken Marino, Matt Walsh, Morgan Spector, Mikey Day, Kieran Culkin, Oscar Nuñez, Ron Funches, Jack Quaid, Stephen Lang and Tiffany Haddish are among the fifth season's vocal star talent.

When asked about specific challenges on the show, McMahan says one big goal is to always stay fresh and never repeat what they've done before. "We want to keep it all exciting and thoughtful," says the two-time Emmy-winning showrunner. "We are always trying to get a nice balance of classic-feeling episode that we can explore in a really new, comedic kind of way, and then doing material that has never been seen before. I feel like we're not running out of steam. We really enjoy writing this show, but I think it's also important that we keep true to the characters too. These aren't the same aliens we met in the first season. On many family animated sitcoms, you don't have to track the growth of characters, but we do. We embrace those changes and we have that in mind as we're writing up to that, as opposed to just ignoring it and resetting. It's a chal-

lenge, but it's one that we embrace."

Love and Marriage

Both McMahan and Bycel say they are thrilled with how fans have embraced the show over the past four years. "Our first season dropped at the beginning of the pandemic, and it was insane that we were able to accomplish that and everybody saw it," says McMahan. "I loved the fan response to the *99 Ships* episode, and I loved that we were able to do an episode where everyone was just stuck in a line the whole time [*The Pupa's Big Day*]. I couldn't imagine doing that on another show."

"I loved our Valentine's Day episode and the fact that our audience embraced Terry and Korvo as a couple," adds Bycel. "They are a plant-based couple, without any human organs! That has been so much fun, and we just love that these two are together. I love the response when we try to top ourselves in ridiculousness. I mean, we did an entire episode because we love *Daylight*, that Sylvester Stallone movie from the '90s. I loved watching people find their own little touchstones that they loved when they were kids." ♦

The fifth season of *Solar Opposites* (11 episodes and a special) premieres on Hulu on August 12.

Another Tasty Treat

Showrunners Ariel Shaffir and Kyle Hunter give us a taste of their new Prime Video spinoff series, *Sausage Party: Foodtopia*.

By Ramin Zahed



If you love your food shows animated, anthropomorphic and totally R-rated, then you need to forget *The Bear* and tune in to Prime Video's new series *Sausage Party: Foodtopia*. The project is based on the well-received 2016 sleeper hit *Sausage Party*, which was directed by Conrad Vernon and Greg Tiernan and made over \$140.7 million worldwide.

The appetizing show continues the adventures of Frank the Sausage (voiced by Seth Rogen) and his friends — Brenda the Hot Dog Bun (Kristen Wiig), Barry the Sausage (Michael Cera) and Sammy the Bagel (Edward Norton). Our off-beat food heroes try to build their own safe haven from mankind after a terrible food destroys their promised land. The voice cast also includes David Krumholtz (Lavash), Sam Richardson (Julius the Orange), Natasha Rothwell (Box of Crackers) and Will Forte (Jack the Human).

Foodtopia's talented executive producers and showrunners Ariel Shaffir and Kyle Hunter chatted with *Animation Magazine* recently

about their project and four-year-long journey lining up all the right ingredients.

"We started working on the show right around the beginning of the pandemic, so it feels pretty surreal to finally see it premiere," says Hunter, who also collaborated with Shaffir on the *Sausage Party* movie and live-action series such as *The Night Before* and *Future Man*. "We hit the ground running, and the show gave us something to focus on during that time. Although it was a silly thing to focus on, the project was a bit of an elixir during some devastating world events."

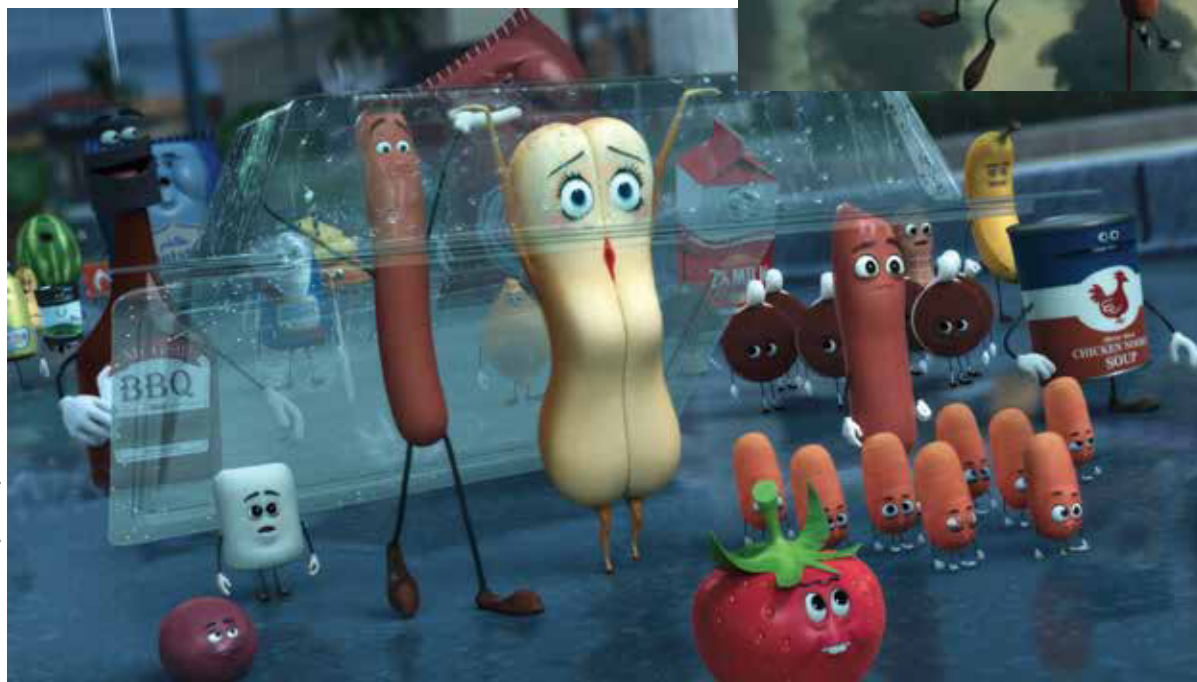
Shaffir says the bulk of the show's team consists of the same people who made the movie. "Seth Rogen, Evan Goldberg and Kyle and I would get in the room and talk about what the show should be about," he says. "We knew that if the movie was successful enough and there was an appetite for it, we wanted to continue the story. We had so many different avenues to go down on. There was no shortage of material."

The production's smooth CG animation is

produced by Stellar Creative Lab (Toronto) and Bardel Entertainment (Vancouver). "We wanted the show to have the same feel as the movie," says Shaffir. "We were going for Pixar-quality CG animation."

Hunter says he and his team relished the chance to work with the same top-notch comedic talent that worked with them on the movie. "They are some of the best ever," he says. "We were fortunate to have some of the same principal actors to reprise their voices — people like Seth Rogen, Kristen Wiig and Michael Cera, and we have new actors like Sam Richardson and Will Forte as well. It was pretty thrilling to have them on board."

The producers knew they were in for a long ride, because they were producing two eight-episode seasons at once. "We sort of produced them back to back, *Lord of the Rings* style. We were producing the first season of the show while writing the second one, and it was a bit more challenging than the movie because we were on a TV schedule."



ECCENTRIC EDIBLES: Frank, Brenda, Barry and Sammy attempt to build their very own food community in Prime Video's new eight-part summer show, *Sausage Party: Foodtopia*.



Enjoying the Golden Age

imation during the pandemic,” says Hunter. “It was really a new Golden Age and we hope it continues. There have been a lot of changes in the industry just over the last year, and there have been some ramifications in terms of which projects get picked up. We definitely want to see more original animated [intellectual property] getting greenlit, and we certainly would love to do a third season of our show!”

anything else, though, I think I am now hardwired to think of food puns all the time. That's the biggest way it has impacted my thinking!"

"I consume less dairy now," adds Hunter. "But I think that's only because I'm older and my body has less tolerance for it!" ♦

Sausage Party: Foodtopia premiered all eight episodes exclusively on Prime Video in more than 240 countries and territories on July 11. The show is a co-production of Annapurna Television, Sony Pictures Television and Amazon MGM Studios.

How to Unleash a Monster-Sized Hit

A look at how the team behind Production I.G's *Kaiju No. 8* captured the magic of the successful manga.

By Charles Solomon

Production I.G's riveting *Kaiju No. 8* was one of the most anticipated anime series of 2024—and is now a hit on both sides of the Pacific. Crunchyroll, which streams the series, recently announced that a sequel is already in production.

Manga artist Naoya Matsumoto scored a big success when *Kaiju No. 8* debuted in the manga anthology, *Shonen Jump*, in July 2020. In just four years, it's sold more than 14 million books and been the subject of spinoff manga, a light novel and smartphone game. A "life-sized" statue of the title character was displayed in Tokyo's Tachikawa Station earlier this year.

Producer Shunsuke Yanagisawa discussed the series with *Animation Magazine* in an email interview, sharing the challenges of adapting a manga that already had such a large following. "We felt significant pressure

because the manga was already globally famous," he said. "However, because the original work was so good and already had a strong fan base, we were able to make the anime something special. We wanted to ensure that fans of the original would enjoy it, but we also saw it as our mission to see how many new fans we could attract."

A Strong Defense Team

In a world under attack by *kaiju* (monsters), the most admired figures are warriors of the Anti-*Kaiju* Defense Force, especially the redoubtable Mina Ashiro, captain of the Third Squadron. When she was a little girl, her calico cat was killed in a *kaiju* strike. She and her friend, Kafka Hibino, vowed to become the greatest fighters in the Defense Force. She succeeded; he didn't.

Kafka has repeatedly taken the entrance exams—and failed. He works a grunt job, clean-

ing up the remains of *kaiju* slain by the Defense Force. (Somebody has to do it.) Kafka is 32. He knows he's no longer as strong or as fast as he was 10 years ago. His experience and awareness of his limits give a very different perspective from the usual teenage anime hero.

"While protagonists in manga and anime are typically in their teens, it's not uncommon to see protagonists in their 30s in Hollywood movies, where their age and life experience significantly impact the story," says Yanagisawa. "Director Shigeyuki Miya and some of our staff members really saw themselves in Kafka, which I think had a positive influence on the anime's direction." Kafka is a character who maintains his innocence and passion no matter what's going on around him, which I believe appeals to younger audiences," Yanagisawa continues. "Balancing the youthful aspects of his character with realism was challenging, but thanks to [voice actor] Masaya Fukuni-



'We felt significant pressure because the manga was already globally famous. However, because the original work was so good and already had a strong fan base, we were able to make the anime something special.'

— Producer Shunsuke Yanagisawa

shi-san's performance, it turned out fine."

Although he's a brave man who'll risk his life to save others, Kafka is also a broadly comic figure, a contrast that adds layers to the character and interest to the story. "Director Tomomi Kamiya and the staff were keen on strongly emphasizing Kafka's comic side," Yanagisawa adds. "His comedic side is close to traditional Japanese shonen manga. Recent shonen manga [stories] have tended to be somewhat darker; we thought this approach would serve as a good counter to that trend. At the directors' suggestion, we included small comedic exchanges, even in serious scenes, to create clear ups and downs. This not only clarified Kafka's character but helped establish the overall tone of *Kaiju No. 8* as a series."

Early on, a *kaiju* strikes while Kafka and Reno Ichikawa, an 18-year-old co-worker, are shoveling gore from the last monster the Defense Force killed. While they recover from their injuries in the hospital, Reno persuades Kafka to apply for the Force one last time with him. Kafka ingests a tiny, parasitic *kaiju* that gives him the ability to transform into *Kaiju No. 8*, a powerful fusion of human and monster. Only Reno knows Kafka's secret.

"At the beginning of the story, Reno's presence serves to negatively emphasize Kafka's age and what's going on [in] his life," explains Yanagisawa. "As the story progresses, Reno's role shifts to reinforcing Kafka's courageous and comic aspects. For Reno, Kafka becomes an ideal, giving him a firm foundation for the choices he makes, while also serving as a

measure of his own dedication and growth."

They both pass the exam (Kafka squeaks by). As cadets, they're under the supervision of Mina — who must encourage the young troops while curbing Kafka's overflowing enthusiasm.

"Mina's presence is essential for making Kafka's story work, so in the anime, we depicted their relationship in more detail," says Yanagisawa. "I think the childhood flashbacks and the conversations with the Defense Force leadership are particularly noteworthy. Mina is a very challenging character to portray as she doesn't speak much, but in these scenes, her bond with Kafka is expressed indirectly rather than by directly showing her emotions or thoughts. The adaptation by scriptwriter Ichirō Ōkouchi was brilliant in this regard."

Kafka's Monsters

In his mutated form, Kafka can take down *kaiju* even the Defense Force teams can't handle. But, like Clark Kent, he has to keep his powers secret. If anyone else in the Defense Force found out about his ability to transform, he would be killed. The threat of discovery deepens the bond between Kafka and Reno, and gives the characters greater complexity.

Matsumoto has said that he planned the manga to be read on smartphones, so the layouts had to be clear in that reduced format. Yanagisawa says, "I believe the dynamic layouts of the original had a positive influence on the animation. However, in terms of the changes Matsumoto-sensei made for smartphones, I think the storyline was more deeply

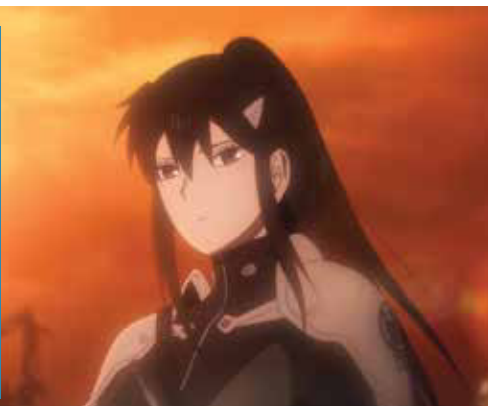
affected. Smartphone readers prefer a faster pace than paper readers, so a lot of stories about the characters' daily lives couldn't be told. Matsumoto-sensei expressed a desire for us to put those stories back in, which aligned with the animation team's approach."

Yanagisawa circles back to the challenges of adapting a popular series — and the changing demographics of anime fandom. "We were aware of the original work's popularity overseas even before the anime adaptation was OK'd, but when we learned about the factors behind its success from Matsumoto-sensei and Shueisha [the publisher of the manga], there were some real surprises," he recalls. "I think the protagonist's age is one factor, but we also heard that Kafka's profession as a cleanup guy was another. Hollywood superhero movies feature protagonists with various occupations; in manga, most protagonists are students. This was a refreshing change for global fans."

"In terms of marketing, we wanted to attract an audience that hadn't been very exposed to anime," Yanagisawa concludes. "Within Japan, anime fans are primarily urban people in their 20s and 30s, so we set out to appeal to suburban residents, families and older age groups. Globally, we're considering how to attract not just anime fans but viewers who might watch superhero movies but haven't watched anime." ♦

The first season of *Kaiju No. 8* is currently streaming on Crunchyroll in 200 countries around the world.

POPULAR MONSTERS: Based on an original manga by Naoya Matsumoto, *Kaiju No. 8* is animated by Production I.G with *kaiju* artwork and design supervision by Studio Khara. A sequel is already in the works.



Colorado's Computer Graphic High

Expects lots of thought-provoking animated shorts, visual experiments and revealing panels at this month's SIGGRAPH confab in Denver.

By Ellen Wolff

SIGGRAPH is marking the start of its second half-century by returning to Colorado (July 31-Aug. 1), the state where its first conference was held in the 1970s. So there's likely to be more than one retro tradition on display as the organization highlights how far the computer-graphics industry has come.

Especially notable is the expanded programming in the conference's Computer Animation Festival, which is reviving the tradition of presenting two distinct daytime shows called Animation Selects. In recent years, juried selections had been confined to the Electronic Theater (colloquially called "the nighttime show").

Although the "ET" will remain a hot ticket in 2024, this year's Electronic Theater director John Kalaigian says a larger formatting of the Computer Animation Festival was a welcome opportunity to craft different show reels for the afternoon sessions. "I know that the audience regards our evening selections as the marquee portion of the Computer Animation Festival, but I don't look at the daytime shows as anything less than the caliber of the Electronic Theater," he says. "I felt it was very important to widen the scope of offerings."

Eye-Popping Collection

The juried selections from all three programs present a smorgasbord of CG shorts — ranging from student and indie films to professional advertising, visual effects, game imagery and scientific visualization. "There are challenging choices that have to be made for timing considerations because of the number of submissions we get," explains Kalaigian, who says SIGGRAPH received around 300 submissions this year.

"Animation Selects was a welcome opportunity to broaden the appreciation for more work and get more foot traffic into those shows. We found time slots that did not compete with other events at SIGGRAPH. The



ELECTRONIC THEATER STARS: Among the projects showcased at this year's SIGGRAPH are (clockwise from top left): *World of Warcraft* cinematic, *LUKI and the Lights*, *After Grandpa*, *Spark: Milky Way Evolution* and *True Detective: Night Country's VFX* (Cinesite)

'lunch window' is when most people are available, and I hope the appetite to see more content will prove fruitful, and we'll see the resurgence of daytime shows." Lest anyone think the Animation Selects are "also-rans," Kalaigian cites the high-profile daytime screening of *Self*, an innovative collaboration between Pixar and stop-motion animation legend Phil Tippett. "It's an extended programming opportunity to present the tremendous work that was done on that exceptional project."

"The key was to pepper in diverse content," notes Kalaigian, who previously worked on Blue Sky feature films such as *Epic* and *Rio 2* and headed the CG department at the commercial studio Hornet. He observes that the "A-student or independent piece isn't likely to get the attention of a production session or a technical paper as much as a larger studio would. So we wanted to give the audience a chance to see work they won't see anywhere else at SIGGRAPH." To that end, this year's attendees will have the chance to see Scientific Visualization pieces from NASA and the Cali-

fornia Academy of Sciences. The power of computer animation to transform data into stunning imagery has been a foundational attraction at SIGGRAPH for decades, when planetary flybys from the Jet Propulsion Laboratory were crowd-pleasers. "Those were seminal achievements," says Kalaigian, whose own technical work has included motion picture simulations of believable foliage. "We shouldn't lose sight of how data visualization has allowed today's filmmakers to achieve increasing levels of realism."

Since many visualization pieces typically have been designed for presentation in planetariums and domed theaters, it's a challenge to adapt them for SIGGRAPH screenings. But this year's festival features *Spark: The Universe in Us*, which uses astrophysical simulations to take viewers on a journey through a three-dimensional model of the Milky Way, exploring the origins of the solar system. Kalaigian explains that "this content was reformatted from a full-dome presentation so that it could be appreciated as a flat-screen experience."



'I feel we still lack the forensic tools for data analysis that can validate whether an author is being truthful or obfuscating their visuals [with AI]. This was definitely open for discussion by our jury.'

- SIGGRAPH's Electronic Theater director John Kalaigian

Of course, there will be familiar names behind professional entertainment selections in both the Electronic Theater and the Animation Selects. They include Blizzard's *World of Warcraft* game cinematic, *The War Within*, Cinesite's visual effects and animation from the *True Detective* series and Double Negative's contributions to HBO's *The Last Of Us*.

But one aspect of this Computer Animation Festival that will be different from prior years is the relatively small number of computer-animated commercials. CG ads were festival mainstays during the formative years of SIGGRAPH, when deep-pocketed commercial advertisers were among the few patrons who could afford to finance spots from then-fledgling production companies such as Pixar and Pacific Data Images. "Advertising is underrepresented in the larger scheme because that kind of animation exists now on tighter schedules," observes Kalaigian. "I hope in years to come that balances out. But it's been cyclical. Right now, we seem to be leaning heavily toward short-form narrative storytelling."

"We've seen a significant rise in short films and classic narrative structures," Kalaigian reports. "Our jury tried not to consider which company or school submitted a work but what each narrative was trying to achieve. The essence of a story was paramount. Each year that becomes more and more of a challenge, as the complexity keeps rising. If you look at these pieces without knowing any of the filmmakers' credentials, you wouldn't be able to tell if it's the work of a student, an independent filmmaker or a small boutique studio."

In fact, the Best in Show Award this year went to a Carnegie Mellon University team led by teacher Moshe Mahler for *The Art of Weightlessness*, which evokes the style of an animated documentary. And the Jury's Choice Award went to the self-funded film *Patterns* by German animator Alex Glawion, who ren-

dered over 100 shots on computers in his living room.

The Best Student Award, for *After Grandpa*, went to the team from École MoPA for its poignant tale of a young boy and the ghost of his

and the AI tool Deform to create the animated and morphed images of *Remembrance*, a journey through the memories of his late grandmother. Although it took a painstaking, frame-by-frame effort to create this "thought-driven montage," the AI process will undoubtedly become much easier over time.

Aided by Robots?

Kalaigian says that only a handful of AI-related submissions were received this year, and methods for judging them are still emerging. "I feel we still lack the forensic tools for data analysis that can validate whether an author is being truthful or obfuscating their visuals. This was definitely open for discussion by our jury."

This year's jurors were as diverse as the varied programs they judged. Kalaigian's fellow jurors came from institutions as different as Mattel TV Studios, Blizzard Entertainment, Method Studios, Georgia Institute of Technology, University of Utah School of Medicine, Rocky Mountain College of Art and Design, ARES Corporation/NASA God-

dard Space Flight Center, Hornet Studios, Electronic Arts, Rockstar Games and BamBam FX.

"I think having some prior SIGGRAPH experience among the jurors is helpful, but we also had colleagues who'd never been to SIGGRAPH," he concludes. "That's not to say those individuals had not been on juries before; it's that they came in with an open mind about what would be in a 'traditional' SIGGRAPH reel. They could look at work strictly from the point of view of technical and artistic merit. They brought their passions from their respective fields, but they also had an appetite — whether or not they work in data visualization or visual effects or animation — to enjoy the show like kids in a movie theater. That's the joy of it all." ♦

To find out more, visit s2024.siggraph.org.



Poetry in Motion

Director Moshe Mahler discusses the inspiration and process of making his award-winning short, *The Art of Weightlessness*.

Seven years ago, writer-director Moshe Mahler became interested in using motion-capture technology to explore the world of Bill Shannon, a performance artist who was born with a degenerative hip condition. The result is a captivating animated short titled *The Art of Weightlessness*, which won the Best in Show prize at this year's SIGGRAPH.

"I have spent my career working at the intersection of research, production, art and tech," says Mahler, an artist and teacher whose work has been featured in attractions at Disney Parks and Resorts, who once led the creative technology team at Disney Research and currently teaches at Carnegie Mellon's Entertainment Technology Center. "Once I saw Bill's performance art, I was immediately interested in collaborating with him. We eventually began discussing the evolution of his crutches, skateboarding and breakdancing, so a documentary format quickly became the target for the piece. I first captured the documentary footage and audio in 2017, and when I finished the film in 2023, my son pointed out that this film took his whole life to make!"

Mahler says he values how animators can make things move to best serve the story being told. "Bill makes incredible, large swooshing arcs with his crutches," he explains. "So, initially, I was interested in doing something much more abstract, as homage to that specific principle of animation. But as we talked, I became more interested in the narrative aspects of his evolution, which also lent itself to fantastical and less literal imagery. So, the film features motion capture, handcrafted keyframe animation, roto, motion graphics, simulation and some hand-drawn elements. My goal was to tie the visual complexity to the evolution of Bill's skill and his ability as a dancer, and animation presents the perfect medium to do this."

Elements of Style

The short's production pipeline used Maya, ZBrush, Houdini and Adobe's Substance suite. "We also needed to create some custom pipelines around the motion-capture workflow to transfer the data to

an animation-rig space," says Mahler. "This allowed our animators to dial in the performance, clean up the data or create a handcrafted sequence from scratch using the same asset. We captured Bill's movements at the Motion Capture Lab at Carnegie Mellon, which uses an optical-based Vicon system."

According to the director, the production was quite modest. "I strongly believe in paying artists for their work, so I got some funding through my department, the Entertainment Technology Center, and applied for grants through the Frank-Ratchye Studio for Creative Inquiry," he adds. "Beyond myself, I had the help of 10 Carnegie Mellon students. This was extremely helpful in keeping

as Bill's dancing and as skillful as his athleticism on his crutches, a rhythm that would take a lifetime to master. These elements came together in a way that I was really happy with, much to Bill's credit, as well as our sound designer, Strollo Sound, and our drummer, Leland Scott Davis."

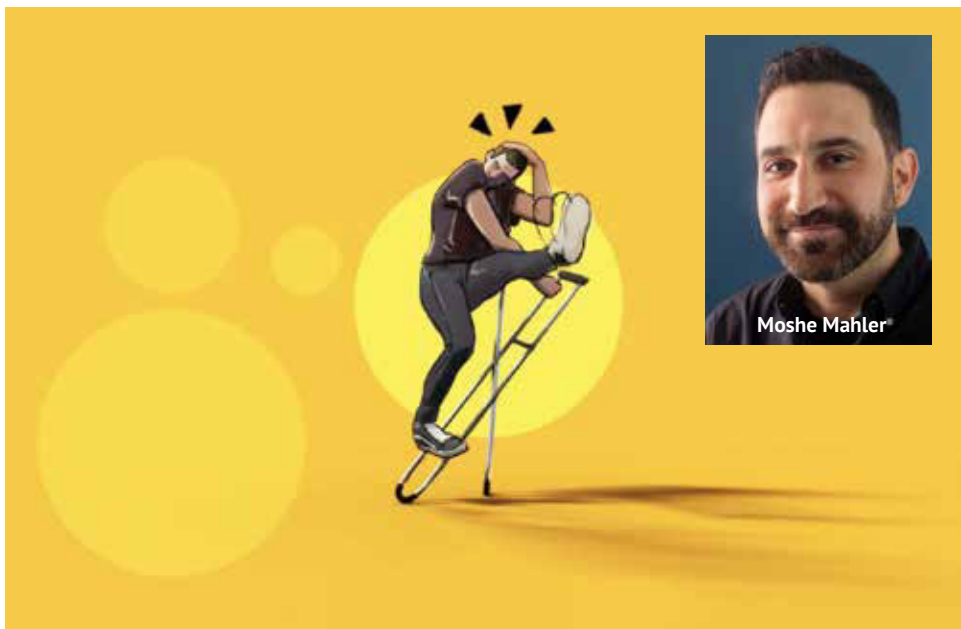
When asked about his animation influences, Mahler brings up James Duesing. "Studying with him opened my eyes to animation's possibilities as a medium," he says. "I pay some homage to Jim in the sequence where Bill goes to the doctor as a child — the room constructs around Bill as he walks through the door. Jim was doing shots like this over 25 years ago, using 3D morphing of environments in films like *Law*

of Averages and *Tender Bodies*."

Seeing Chris Landreth's award-winning short *Ryan* was another pivotal experience. "I remember watching *Ryan* at SIGGRAPH in 2004 and being blown away by its emotional impact," he recalls. "Too often, we think of animation as a genre, not a medium. *Ryan* showed that animation is not only an expressive medium but also capable of serious doc-



Moshe Mahler



the project moving forward over the six- to seven-year period, and I genuinely appreciate the talent and hard work our students brought to the project." The director is quick to mention the importance of the role of music, especially *A Drum Thing* by the John Coltrane Quartet. "This is a seven-minute piece of jazz that starts off with a fairly basic drum beat, but the drumming becomes more complex and impressive as the track progresses," he explains. "At the beginning of the film, the colors are muted. The first time you see the crutches, they are alone, moving through white space. The soundtrack begins with a simple drum beat almost anyone could play. This simplicity matches Bill's awkwardness on the crutches when he first uses them as a child. By the film's end, Bill performs amazing breakdance moves on his crutches. The colors are vibrant. The drums are now as complex

umentary storytelling — which, of course, was influential in taking on this project."

Now that *The Art of Weightlessness* is getting wider exposure, Mahler hopes his work will convey an important message to audiences. "We all have challenges or adversity in life, some more serious than others, but we all have challenges nonetheless," he says. "Bill's circumstances led to his evolution, which resulted in a very tangible and beautiful expression of art and movement. So, I hope audiences take away that this is not about overcoming adversity; there is no overcoming a degenerative hip condition, for example. But instead, understanding that we should strive to evolve throughout our lives." ♦

***The Art of Weightlessness* screens at SIGGRAPH's Electronic Theater this month. For more info, visit momahler.com.**



Staying on Track

Director Alex Glawion takes us on the creative journey of making his award-winning short, *Patterns*.

An encounter with a special women provides a harried train passenger relief from a rude and noisy world in *Patterns*, the SIGGRAPH Jury Prize-winning short by director Alex Glawion. The Frankfurt-based helmer, who has also worked on commercials for LEGO, Google and Sharp, tells us that his real-life experiences inspired the charming short. “My wife, Nastja, and I undertook a weekly four-hour commute between Constance and Darmstadt, Germany, to keep our long-distance relationship alive,” he recalls. “We wanted to make it work, and we did – even when circumstances fought against us every step of the way!”

He adds, “All the traveling requires a very healthy dose of perseverance and a trusty pair of noise-canceling headphones. And it certainly helps when you’re focusing on who’s waiting for you at your destination: the love of your life Cooped up in a seat with nothing to do but wait, a nudge was all it took to tip the balance and throw you into the deep end, where the only way out was an ingrained pattern that made you don those headphones and escape. Escape into a world that wasn’t always easy to leave.”

Glawion began his initial style tests and a rough story outline back in 2017, but serious work didn’t begin until the end of 2022, and the short wrapped up in January of this year. “Since this was a zero-budget personal short, I could only work on it during periods when I wasn’t occupied with active client projects, which significantly extended the overall timeframe,” explains the filmmaker. “The primary software used was Cinema 4D, with Redshift serving as the render engine. Blender was employed for specific tasks such as UV unwrapping and quick modeling. Marvelous Designer handled



any clothing design, while After Effects was the main compositing software, and Premiere Pro was used for editing and mixing.”

Cracking the Visual Code

Discussing the challenges of his project, Glawion says translating certain key moments in a story that made perfect sense on paper but were incredibly difficult to show and understand visually without dialog were the toughest parts of the experience. “At times, this challenge was so significant that I had to go back and adjust the script for key scenes to ensure they worked visually. Although this risked affecting the entire storyline, it also provided an opportunity to revisit and enhance certain aspects.”

He adds, “They say a filmmaker is never truly satisfied with their film, always seeing areas for improvement. After all, you can never experience it for the first time again. Despite meticulously planning the story, rewriting it countless times, redoing scenes multiple times, and re-editing the music and shots for maximum impact, my inner critic often urges me to move on to the next project. It whispers that the ef-

fort is wasted and that my work pales compared to what my idols produce. But then, I show it to an audience, to my wife, to my friends, and they have tears in their eyes. It wins awards, and in those moments, it’s all worth it. Knowing that my work resonates with an audience is what I absolutely love and what motivates me to continue creating short films.

The filmmaker cites Jérémy Clapin’s 2008 short *Skhizein* as his first real introduction and motivator to make narrative animated shorts. “The story and visual translation of the subject resonated so deeply with me that I still revisit his short from time to time,” he recalls. “The works of Studio Ghibli and Hayao Miyazaki, particularly their depiction of moments in-between, have also significantly influenced me. More recently, the groundbreaking styles of Alberto Mielgo and Ash Thorp also have motivated me to experiment freely and push creative boundaries.”

Looking back at his creative journey, Glawion says learning to embrace iteration was the biggest lesson he learned. “Throughout the process, I realized that being open to refining and adapting the story, visuals, and even the technical aspects significantly enhanced the final product. It taught me that flexibility and willingness to iterate are crucial to achieving the best possible outcome,” he notes.

The director says he hopes SIGGRAPH audiences will remember what’s at the heart of his story: “Don’t let that armrest-slammer, chips-eater, or loud-talker ruin your perfect day!” he says. “Everyone is the main protagonist of their own life. I gain nothing from chewing that nuisance gum until my jaw hurts and everything from directing my story towards what truly matters!” ♦

For more info, visit alexglawion.com.

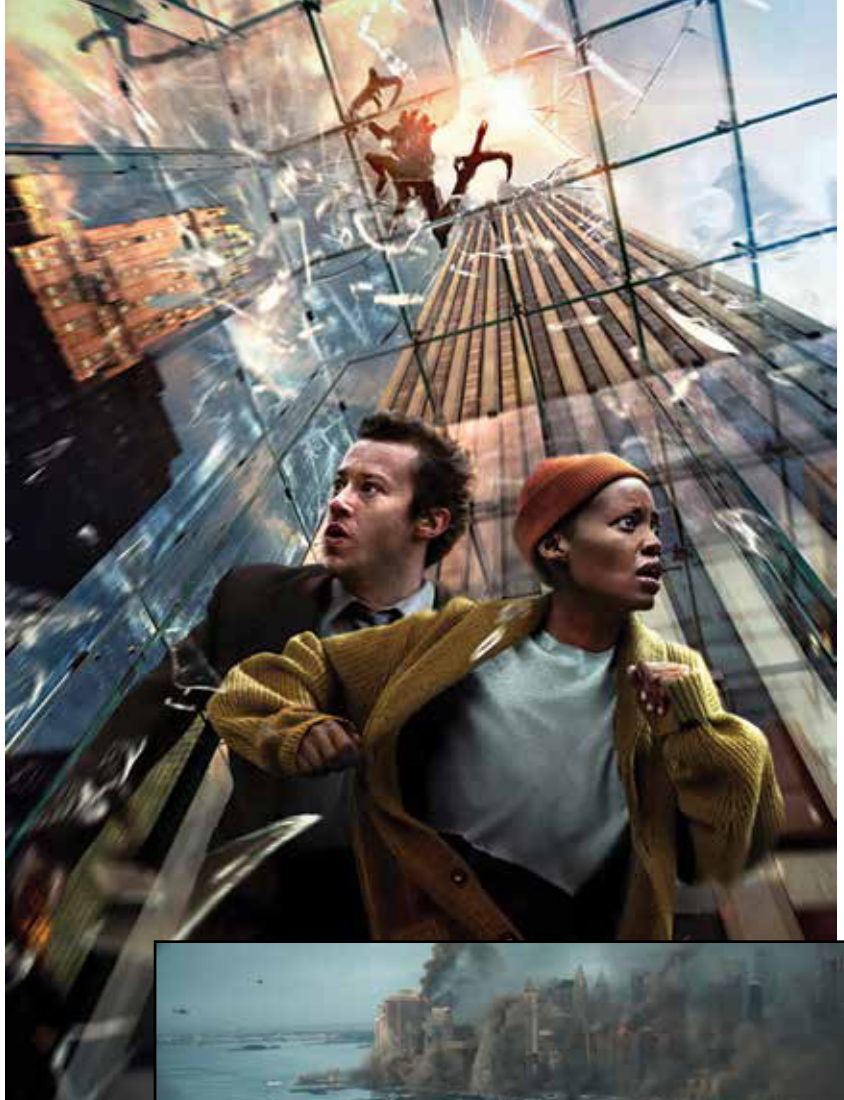




A Third Encounter with the Blind Aliens

VFX supervisor
Malcolm Humphreys
offers his take on creating
the captivating visuals for
A Quiet Place: Day One.

By Trevor Hogg



In early summer, audiences were introduced to the initial days of *A Quiet Place's* blind, predatory aliens in Paramount's *A Quiet Place: Day One*. Michael Sarnoski (*Pig*) took over directorial duties from John Krasinski (*IF*), who helmed the first two installments. The franchise's other newcomers include special effects supervisor Mark Holt (*In the Heart of the Sea*) and VFX supervisor Malcolm Humphreys (*The Batman*). The production also shifted from New York to the Warners Bros. Studio Leavesden in Watford, England, which doubled as Manhattan.

Moving from a rural setting to a massive urban environment allowed the storytelling to be approached from a different perspective. "The first couple of films had small budgets and were shot in one location," explains Humphrey. "New York has lots of buildings and people, so there are huge opportunities to show the creatures more than what we had previously seen, as well as actually seeing them in herds and family units."

From Russia with Meteorites

Humphreys says that real-life dashcam footage from Russia was indispensable in creating

the meteor shower that signifies the arrival of the interstellar invaders. "There seems to be a lot of meteorites in Russia," he notes. "The challenging thing that we had to do with the meteorites was making them visible and readable. A lot of the reference [material] is at night, so we're trying to explore what they would look like during the day."

Starting things off is a bus caught in the middle of meteor shower. "One of the meteorites lands and you see the shockwave hit a bus," explains Holt. "Every window gets blown out. To coordinate that, they wanted the light from the meteor in the background. We had flares on a dropping wire that would drop down to the end of the road so you could see the light shadows come across. Then we had a big explosion. It was all about timing how the shockwave runs toward the bus. As it hits the bus, we have all of these little air cannons hidden on the bus that blow out the windows like a ripple. The end of the bus opens out after being hit by this shockwave. They wanted lights to spill into the bus, so we got these black roller blinds that rolled back and sud-

denly you have this white light that appears at the end; that was all done in one shot."

Whereas in the past the creatures were lurking in the shadows, this latest incarnation has them hunting in daylight in full view. "If you watch the previous performances of the creatures, I would call them 'snatch and grabs,'" says Humphreys. "If you blink, you'll miss it. Or they're slow tension-building moments. This film is definitely exploring how they look like in a herd. It was quite a challenge to not make them look too goofy because of the proportions of their limbs versus their body. We did a couple of snatch and grabs. There was a lot of exploration as to where should the person get speared. Rather than pushing people, they end up pulling them, because they're so fast you miss what is happening. You essentially see the person for a little bit longer as the creature passes, and then they whip off-screen, which essentially hits better."

Getting as much as possible done in camera was a key directorial mandate. "There is



'New York has lots of buildings and people, so there are huge opportunities to show the creatures more than what we had previously seen, as well as actually seeing them in herds and family units.'

— VFX supervisor Malcolm Humphries

a bit where you actually see the claws of the creatures coming into the theater as they're climbing the walls," explains Holt. "We got the design of the claws and had them 3D printed in a heavy industrial plastic. We made these rigs on cans that would actually push the claw forward and then push it into the room — and then push down as if the creature was climbing up the building. We must have had 12 or 14 of these rigs set up around the entire room. When you went outside, you could see these rigs and pistons, but inside it was all dressed with break-away sections. As the claw came through, it broke what looked like real brickwork, and timbre is coming through. Then we programmed a motion-control camera so it would pan around,

and you see all of the claws coming in as the people were sitting in the foreground. Lots of rigs like that where we rely on visual effects to go, 'What do you want it to look like? How is the animation going to look?' From that information, we design our rigs to suit that."

The bulk of the footage was actually captured in Manhattan. "I was so happy that Michael was up for shooting aerial plates," says Humphries. "We had a helicopter unit shoot aerial plates around New York to give more scope to the film. But that also gave us great material to work on to intermix with the backlot that we've done to make it feel more authentic."

According to the supervisor, a lot of physical debris was needed. "A number of things we did

later on was to actually add more belongings like bags and shirts," he explains. "Some of our artists captured parts of their wardrobe and used them to distribute around the city."

A tricky atmospheric element to achieve was the massive dust coating caused by meteors smashing into the buildings. "Michael would give us an image and say, 'I want it to look like this with floating bits of black ash in the air.' We got this black tissue paper that was so fine it would float away. We put this fine paper in a dust bin, got a nylon streamer and streamed it. It turned into this lovely, floaty black ash."

The Lower Depths

Some of the film's breathtaking action sequences take place in a submerged subway. "We had to make quite a large underwater gimbal that allowed us to adjust the platform," says Holt. "As they're getting lower and lower, we're making the floor move down so it looks like the ceiling is coming up. We have the ceiling on a gimbal, so we can bring the ceiling down and the floor up. It made things narrow and claustrophobic. That was quite a big rig that was about 40 feet long. You're trying to push down all of that water. You don't want any resistance, so we made the whole top surface in this checker fiberglass mesh that you could walk on and the water would flow through the floor." There were 400 to 450 visual effects shots, including optical work, created over a period of a year and half, with Industrial Light & Magic as the main vendor, along with Important Looking Pirates, Proof, Cadence Effects and an in-house team. "Michael is fun to work [with]," says Humphries. "He'll give you a loose brief and leave it up to us to come up with creative ideas on how to make the shot cool. You see creatures jumping onto cars, and we'd throw suggestions like, 'Wouldn't it be cool if a creature was to grab the door of this car, accidentally threw it away, and that created another alarm which affects another creature?' The shots evolved and turned into something that was better at the end of the day." ♦



SPACE INVADERS: The VFX team created new details for the "Death Angels" from outer space for this summer's thrilling *A Quiet Place* outing. They fleshed out how they interacted with buildings and cars and how they operated in a hive mentality.

Paramount's *A Quiet Place: Day One* was released in theaters on June 27. The movie is currently playing in theaters worldwide.



Tech Reviews: Special SIGGRAPH Edition

By Todd Sheridan Perry



Chaos Vantage

I'm a little late on the Chaos Vantage story – so much so that I missed the 1.0 release and we are already at 2.5. So, let's have a quick rundown of what Vantage is:

Vantage is a real-time rendering engine from Chaos, the guys who brought us V-Ray, which incidentally is my go-to renderer. But, given the heritage, you know that everything learned in V-Ray is applied to Vantage. However, it renders much faster – essentially in real time. The 3D scenes are brought into Vantage via a live link with 3D Studio MAX or a saved out .vrscene file, but the live link reflects any changes that happen in Max and updates in Vantage automatically. In addition, the Chaos Cosmos library (which is essentially the Chaos flavor of Unreal's Quixel) can be used to quickly populate and dress scenes with objects that are already textured and optimized for use in Vantage.

So, what's new in 2.5? Initially, Vantage was great for arch viz – quickly setting up and dressing architecture



interiors and exteriors and being able to render, present and iterate in real time. Since the 2.0 version, Chaos has brought Vantage more and more into the VFX realm, migrating tools from V-Ray into Vantage. These include such things as support for animated meshes, including support for animated vegetation from Chaos Cosmos, Chaos Scatter tools, GPU denoising support, VRayEdgesTex and round edges, scene state and render element support, displacement maps, hair and fur, ACEScg color space and chromatic aberration.

Along with new features, there are fixes, modifications and performance boosts. Texture loading is 5-10% faster in 2.5, and structure rebuilds and instance updates are faster. UI/UX adjustments have also been made based on user feedback.

Also, with this latest release, Vantage has initial support with OpenXR framework for monoscopic or stereoscopic output for VR headsets, with the caveats that this is just getting started and that tethered viewing gives the smoothest performance. But I think that it'll ultimately catch up in later interactions for wireless headsets.

I feel that all Vantage real-time technology, along with the VR-headset support, has been paving the way for Project Arena, which marks Chaos expanding to virtual environments and LED volumes. I'd be happy to do

a review if someone kindly lent me their LED volume for a day!

Website: Chaos.com/vantage

Price: \$42-\$59 per month (solo, premium, enterprise)

V-Slate

Filmmaking is a complex process akin to waging war, but without so many casualties. There are many departments with their own series of tasks. Everyone has unique jobs, all created to support and focus on one cause – making the movie. There are also many phases: development, preproduction, production and postproduction. And at each phase, the parameters change. The scope changes. Scenes are rearranged. Scripts are rewritten, reedited, expanded, compressed. And we in the visual effects industry are affected by all of this, at all phases, and must keep track of it. (To be fair, I'm speaking myopically and somewhat selfishly – because I'm a VFX supervisor, but all departments on a film are critical.)

In many production-tracking systems out there, the focus is on postproduction. But VFX starts (or should start) during development. So, we need a production-tracking system where we can keep track of script versions, changes to those scripts, initial bids, subsequent bids, storyboards, animatics, pre-viz – and then have all that information seamlessly migrate into the production phase, through postproduction and delivery. This is where V-Slate comes in.

V-Slate was developed by VFX producer Alejandro Diego von Dorrier, based on his multidecade experience as a partner/producer at Ollin VFX in Mexico City and as a studio-side producer on multiple shows for Amazon Studios. The backbone of V-Slate is FileMaker Pro (which is no stranger in VFX), but Von Dorrier has written a substantial tool set to track scripts, schedules, budgets, financials, vendors and deliveries. Further, reports can be quickly built and exported to be delivered to production so they also know how things are going.

V-Slate is primarily integrated with Autodesk's Flow Production Tracking (aka ShotGrid, née ShotGun), but Von Dorrier has plans to expand into other systems such as FTrack. V-Slate pulls and pushes data from Flow, including access to clips. VFX supes can select multiple clips or playlists and download the clips for review, as opposed to hunting in the Flow interface.

We used this on Prime Video's *I'm A Virgin*, which predominantly used old-school effects like forced perspective, miniatures, puppets and other in-camera gags – things that aren't usually tracked in VFX produc-

tion-tracking software – because all pieces were being created and prepped *before* cameras rolled – but the VFX team was still integrally involved. Von Dorrier customized V-Slate to track all that information and then export the VFX plans to PDFs, which were distributed with call sheets to the rest of the crew – all of whom were critical to executing the shots.

V-Slate is definitely meant for full film productions,

and it comes with a per-production cost – but it also includes support. The "full production," however, doesn't exclude low-budget or indie films. In fact, something like V-Slate would keep costs down – because planning, prep work and tracking costs

is all about reducing waste. That, of course, leads to leaner productions.

Website: V-slate.com

Price: \$9,500 for 24 months per project

InstaMAT

The people who brought us InstaLOD have come up with a new product five years in the making: InstaMAT. It's hard to qualify and quantify InstaMAT because it does so many things, and in fact, I'm barely going to scratch the surface. Let's boil it down to the company's own description: "Elemental tools for the design and automation of 3D materials, assets and texturing." I think someone on Discord said, "It's like if Houdini, Substance Designer and Substance Painter had a baby." Both descriptions are a bit reductive but give us a good starting point.

On the surface level (pun unintended), you get a combination of procedural materials and painting tools. Choose from a library of prebuilt materials, like metals, woods or rocks, and throw it onto a mesh. It can be a layered system in a stack where you can blend materials, elements or textures. Paint hand strokes or add decals, all with UDIM support. And then bring them into other DCCs with integrations and plugins for Maya, Max, Blender, Unity, Unreal (and there are future plans for Houdini).

There are plenty of prefab accessory tools for anything you were doing in other software. For example, there is a Materialize Image function to convert photos into PBR materials, so your photo is transformed into a node-based shader with the albedo, normals, height, occlusion and roughness. There are scaling tools to dynamically adapt to resolutions. You can create instances of materials with promoted parameters (like in Houdini and Unreal). There is a neural style transfer node for stylizing the looks.



Further, InstaMAT looks beyond just creating textures for a single, unique object. Abstract is cognizant of larger pipelines for VFX and game development. That's why there are lots of workflows for scaling processes — making things procedural. Functions like assigning materials across many objects, filtered by wildcards in the names of objects. Instancing materials with dependencies tied to data within the meshes. And trying not to depend on UVs for texturing but instead determining surfaces through mesh volumes.

But wait: This is just the bare-bones, top-level tool. The rabbit hole goes deep quickly. All these functions are based on nodal systems you can drill down into. Much like Unreal Blueprints, Substance Designer graphs or Houdini systems, you can get to a granular, programming-language level — all nodal. So, the amount of customization is essentially infinite. Through Element Graphs and what they call "Atom Graphs," everything (or nearly everything) is an accessible node, and each system can be encapsulated



in compressed functions.

It's all a little intimidating if you haven't touched the nodal workflows, but honestly, in a world with Houdini and Blender nodes (or Maya's Bifrost, Max's TyFlow or Mari and Substance Designer's nodes), I think you might be intentionally avoiding it. So, InstaMAT might be a great place to start — because if you are an individual or small company making under \$100,000 a year, you can get InstaMAT for free. And further, once you can afford it, you can opt for a perpetual license or a subscription — which is quite nice.

Website: Instamaterial.com

Creation Effects: Black Hole

Noel Powell, the creative driver behind the Creation Effects tools for After Effects, has been busy creating a new set of After Effects templates geared toward updating its Space Effects kit with three new templates: The first one is the Black Hole template.

Based on NASA simulations and imagery, and no doubt influenced by the Kip Thorne-inspired imagery from *Interstellar*, the Black Hole disc template starts you out with the default accretion disc, with stars being stretched and pulled and around the event horizon. However, there are seven animations that Powell used to create the promo videos — just to get you started.

The scene is set in After Effects' 3D space, so modifying your camera will give you the correct perspective as you change your vantage point. Plus, the background star field is on a huge cube, which provides flexibility with your camera — you will

always see stars no matter which direction you face.

Each feature of the black hole is on a different layer with controllable features, but the best way to control the look is through the master control layer, which has parameters tied to all the layers with expressions. The list of parameters is much too long to list here. However, the response of the comp is fast enough that you can play with the settings and dial in the look you like. So, you can get to the *Interstellar* look, or you can turn off the accretion disc and the glows, and what you have left is the lensing effect of the star background getting warped and refracted through the gravitational field of the black hole.

And if you want to evoke Disney's 1970s-era movie, *The Black Hole*, you have the option to go with the black-hole-funnel look as well.

As usual, the documentation is thorough and self-explanatory, with a darn good tutorial. Black Hole on its own is \$39, or you can get it in the Space Effects bundle for \$99. Either way, it's a total bargain.

Creation Effects: Terra

The Terra template is specifically for making high Earth orbit or distant shots from space. Like other Creation Effects, you have controls in a master control with parameters that manipulate individual layers, which include the continents during the day or night, with the option of city lights. Water, clouds and atmosphere are on their own customizable layers.

Earth models are available at 32MP (8,000 x 4,000) texture maps or 128MP (16,000 x 8,000), depending on how close you want to get. These are mapped onto a 3D sphere, so lighting within After Effects will illuminate your Earth appropriately.

The water has specular, brightness and saturation controls. The clouds offer parameters for the rotation that are separate from the planet. The density can be tweaked, which is a function of opacity. Plus, shadows can be added with a combination of embossing or an offset for long shadows.

And the atmosphere (as opposed to the clouds) is the dangerously thin layer around our planet, only really seen on the edges of Earth. More specifically, this looks more intense when the sun is behind the Earth — backlighting that atmosphere. For realism, this is usually pretty subtle — but if you want to go Bayhem on it, you have that option too!

The package is bundled with Creations 15 lens flares to take pace of the old, tired Adobe flares. You can drag the flare into your comp, and it will tether to the position of the sun. One bummer is that the flare isn't automatically occluded, so it's recommended to animate the flare — but I bet with some fancy After Effects-ing, you could get a mask from Earth and drive an occlusion in the flare layer. And as a bonus you get the Moon!



Each of the layers work pretty well on their own, but you can dig deeper into each pre-comp to customize everything to taste. Like Black Hole, Terra is a mere \$39 but can be found in the Space Effects package.

Creation Effects: Solaris

As with the Black Hole template, Powell has turned to NASA as a resource for footage and inspiration to make a 3D template for creating glorious sun animation. Solaris uses footage of solar flares, prominences, coronal mass ejections and the sun's surface from NASA. 25 different solar elements and five 8K surface textures.

The template is, again, in 3D space, so you have flexibility in where you place your camera, and the scene will remain appropriately in perspective. The solar elements are on planes attached to the surface of the sun, so when you adjust the parameters, such as positions and orientation, the flares and CMEs remain attached to the surface. There are also After Effects-made prominences that are more customizable than the footage-based elements, so you can keep within reality or make things more extreme if you like.



Although, as in the other templates, there are plenty of examples that match the shots in the demo reel for Solaris, Powell has also included a "Build Your Own Sun" template that can be used to follow the tutorial. But even better, stepping through building the sun gives insight into how the different components work together. What this means is that you can better build customized suns for your sci-fi short or DIY version of *3-Body Problem*.

Like other Creation Effects templates, most of the controls are in a master control layer, where you can adjust the rotation of the sun, position and radius; the hue and glow controls, as well as some edge controls to roughen the edge to make it feel more organic. All the prominences have individual controls within the control layer.

The package also offers a Heat Haze control for that signature heat distortion. Powell has thrown in a few more lens flares from the Creation Effects Lens Flare Collection. Some sun/heat-themed titles from the Creation Effects Title Effects collection. And to top it off, you also get 19 appropriate sound effects.

Solaris is also \$39. So if you splurge and get the whole Space Effects combo pack, you are already saving some money just on the Black Hole, Terra and Solaris templates alone.

Website: Creationeffects.com

Price: \$39 (for individual tool), \$99 (for bundle) ♦

Todd Sheridan Perry is an award-winning VFX supervisor and digital artist whose many credits include *I'm a Virgo*, *For All Mankind* and *Black Panther*. He can be reached at teaspoonvfx.com.

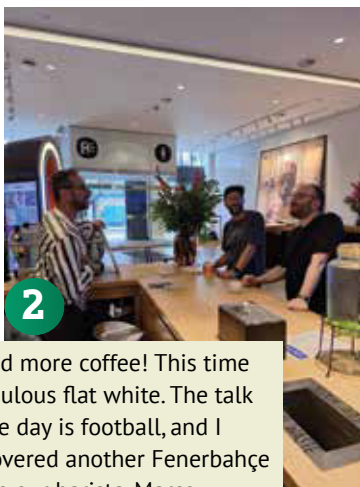


This month, we get a glimpse of what it's like to be an Oscar-nominated animation supervisor at Framestore thanks to the amazing **Arslan Elver**, who was production animation supervisor on Paramount's charming late spring feature, *IF*.



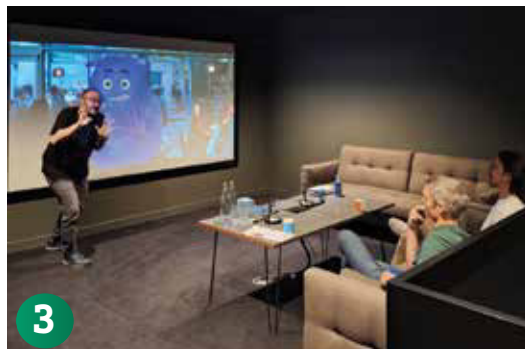
1

There's no typical day for an animation supervisor, but it always starts with a good cup of coffee.



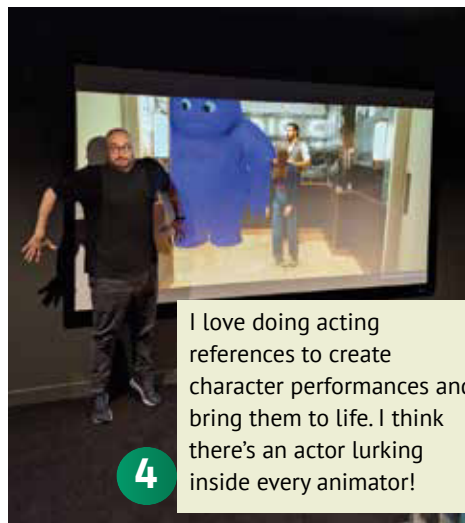
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I need more coffee! This time a fabulous flat white. The talk of the day is football, and I discovered another Fenerbahçe fan in our barista, Marco.



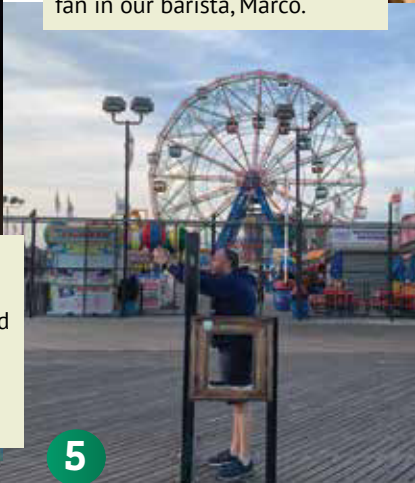
3

Teamwork makes the dream work. I'm so lucky to come in everyday and get to work with such talented and passionate people.



4

I love doing acting references to create character performances and bring them to life. I think there's an actor lurking inside every animator!



5



6

Here is a beautiful shot from the movie with Lewis and Bea going to the *IF*'s retirement home, located underneath the swing ride in Coney Island



7

This is how I end most of my days: going home and commuting from central London under the city's sunshine.

Some days, I get to go on set. This is me on **John Krasinski's** *IF* doing some preparation for the Imaginary Friends' retirement home.



8

Sometimes, I get to attend premieres and witness the work of our talented team on the big screen. Always such a proud moment: I'm here with our amazing VFX supervisor, **Oliver Armstrong**.



9

IF (Photo: Paramount)

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